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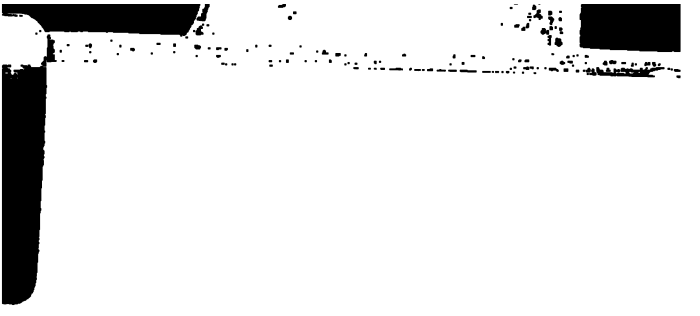
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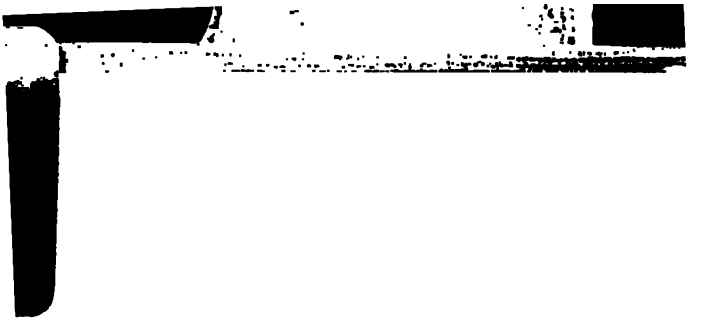


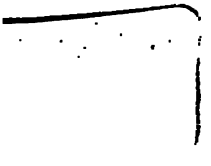


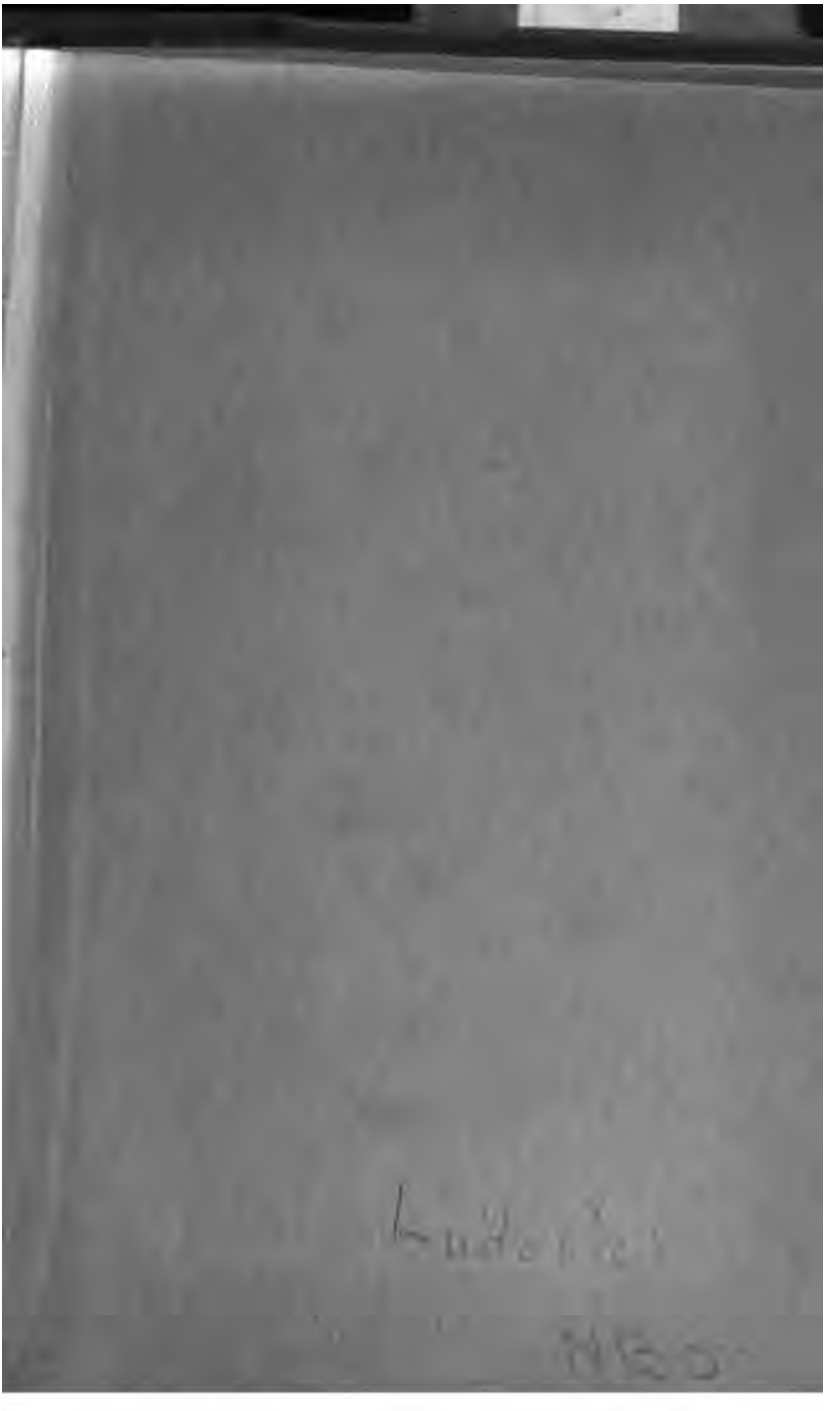


KNIGHT CONRAD OF RHEINSTEIN

Ludovic
NBO















KNIGHT CONRAD OF RHEINSTEIN

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KNIGHT CONRAD

OF RHEINSTEIN

A ROMANCE OF THE DAYS OF CHIVALRY

BY JULIUS LUDOVICI



CONRAD OF RHEINSTEIN

ILLUSTRATED BY THE AUTHOR

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DEDICATED

TO MY ESTEEMED FRIEND,

COL. WM. M. PEGRAM, OF BALTIMORE, MD.,

WITH HEARTFELT GRATITUDE FOR

HIS KINDLY ENCOURAGEMENT AND ASSISTANCE IN

THE WRITING OF THIS STORY.

THE AUTHOR.



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KNIGHT CONRAD

OF RHEINSTEIN.

A Romance of the Days of Chivalry.

CHAPTER I.

CONRAD.

"A true knight;
Not yet mature yet matchless."
—*Shaks. Troilus and Cressida.*

Before the walls of Jerusalem, a German warrior of the Holy Cross lay in his tent, mortally wounded.

It was in the time of the third Crusade, near the close of the twelfth century, and under the leadership of the chivalrous Emperor Frederick I, surnamed Barbarossa, that the Teutonic Barons and nobles enlisted for the first time, and with great enthusiasm, in the sacred cause.

A sad disaster which befell them in crossing a small river in Asia Minor, in which their brave leader lost his

life, prevented all save a small remnant from reaching the Holy Land. Among the devoted few, who arrived in the most deplorable condition, carrying with them their dead Emperor to be buried in Jerusalem, was our wounded knight, the noble Baron von Rheinstein, with his two sons. They but slowly recovered from their march. After many more vicissitudes they fought under the King of France before St. Jean d'Acre, and eventually joined their fortunes with those of Richard I of England, then leading his brave knights against Saladin, the great and hitherto victorious Saracen chief.

After many alternate victories and defeats, Richard Coeur de Lion, on that very day, had given battle to the Infidels, gained the great final victory of Jaffa, retaken that fortress and reopened the road to Jerusalem—a victory dearly purchased, however, by the sacrifice of many valiant knights and retainers.

The older of the dying warrior's sons had fallen that day at his side. His fine young form lay stiff and cold in a corner of the tent. The younger, though equally brave, had escaped unhurt. He was kneeling at the bedside of his father. Perfect quiet had succeeded the fearful din of battle, nothing was audible save the flappings of bats' wings against the tent, or the distant cry of the vulture claiming its prey on the field of carnage. "My boy," said the dying knight,



His armor and the polished cross on his breast glistened in the rays of the setting sun.



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ASTOR,
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as he fixed his dim eyes on the handsome, stalwart young soldier, "thou art the last of thy race. If peace follow our dearly bought victory of today, return to thy mother and take her my last farewell. If, however, war continue, enlist once more under our Holy Banner to avenge the death of thy father and thy brother. I leave to thee yonder trusty sword. With it I have slain many an infidel dog. I know full well thou wilt not disgrace it. Soon thou wilt be lord of my castle and thy mother's sole defender. My Arabian steed Saladin, captured from our foe, that has carried me through many a bloody conflict—take care of him also. Be brave and steadfast. Relieve the distressed and comfort thy mother."

While uttering these words he had raised himself with much difficulty upon his couch; but now he sank back exhausted. After a considerable pause he resumed in a voice whose faintness betokened his failing strength: "Open wide the tent, Conrad; I would fain look once more upon the stars so full of mystery. Look—what do they tell thee? Yonder, far beyond, we shall meet again."

His voice ceased; his eyes remained fixed upon the stars; his lips quivered; his trembling hands became stiff and cold; and the lion heart of the hero ceased to beat.

After pressing his lips upon his father's brow, Conrad arose.

With sudden impulse he seized the huge sword just bequeathed to him. Holding it on high he repeated the solemn oath, taken when knighted three years before, to wield it ever in the cause of the Christian religion, and in defense of honor and virtue.

On the following day, before the blood-red sun had hidden itself behind the walls of Jerusalem, Conrad stood by the grave while the earth was thrown over the remains of his father and brother. He then turned away with a heavy heart.

A month of inaction ensued. When it ended, King Richard was enabled to obtain from Saladin a truce of three years and eight months, with an assurance to pilgrims of free access to the Holy Sepulcher. Hard bought privileges, indeed, to gain which many a noble knight and brave soldier had left home and kindred in distant lands, never to return; their corpses lay buried before the walls of the Holy City, side by side with those of the unbelieving enemy.

Adding his father's and his brother's possessions to his own, Conrad started, with a goodly number of well-equipped retainers, on his homeward journey. At this time the Crusaders were held in high honor in every court and hamlet in Europe; so Conrad was

feasted, and treated with marked distinction throughout his entire journey by sea and land.

At the end of two months he found himself within a day's ride of his ancestral castle on the Rhine. As the country around began to look familiar his spirits rose, and he urged his horse forward; but his heart sank when he thought of the sad tidings he had to bring to his mother, now so near. Slackening the pace of his beautiful black Arab barb, the young Crusader presented a striking picture. A pensive look sat on his handsome countenance; his graceful figure was the ideal of physical perfection; his fair locks shimmered in the light as they were stirred by the evening breeze; his armor and the polished cross on his breast glistened in the rays of the setting sun.

It was quite dark when the weary traveler reached a well-remembered inn. It being too late to cross the river that night, he decided to seek food and rest under its hospitable roof, and to proceed on his journey early next morning.

The inn-keeper, not recognizing Conrad, who had greatly changed during his long absence and hard service, felt completely overpowered by the arrival of an unknown Knight of the Holy Cross and his retainers. All that the well-filled larder contained scarcely sufficed to satisfy the hungry guests. In fact, three young pigs, the entire stock of the pen,

were roasted whole before their appetites were appeased. After enjoying for some time the embarrassment of the worthy landlord, Conrad determined to make himself known. When "mine host" heard the young Crusader's name he seemed both surprised and distressed; and at Conrad's anxious inquiries concerning his mother the good man raised his hands, turned his eyes upward and assayed in vain to make reply. Conrad, much alarmed, urged him to explain. Little by little, and with much hesitation on the part of the host, the astounded listener was told of the sacking and burning of the castle of Rheinstein by robber knights during his absence, and of the death of the Baroness, she having been found in her chamber, which had escaped the flames. The manner of her death no one knew. Her remains had been consigned to earth in the little churchyard near the village. Conrad sat speechless and motionless for some moments. Suddenly, in an agony of grief, he sprang to his feet, and lifting his right hand to heaven, vowed to avenge his mother's death, and to punish the robbers who had destroyed his ancestral castle.

"Who," asked he, "dared to commit this dastardly outrage?"

"Hans von Waldhorst, your father's old foe," was the reply. "'Tis said that he has become subject of

late to uncontrollable fits of savage temper. It was during one of these that he did this last damnable deed."

Conrad paced the room for a while in great agitation, then threw himself into a chair in order to collect his thoughts. Without means to rebuild his castle, he must needs be a homeless wanderer. He determined, at last, to dismiss his retainers and set out alone to retrieve his fortunes. Still brooding over the sad story which he had just heard, he retired to his room and threw himself upon the couch. As sleep gradually overcame him, he dreamed that he saw his mother alive welcoming him back to his home. Alas! that it should have been a dream!

On the following morning he crossed the Rhine by means of one of those old-fashioned ferries, which are in use to this day in some parts of Europe, a boat tied to an anchor and moved hither and thither by the current. He first visited the grave of his mother, then spent several hours of sad interest on the spot where once had towered the castle of his ancestors. In a desperate mood he guided his horse among the crumbling ruins. Saladin seemed to hang his head in sympathy, while his young master inwardly renewed his vows of vengeance against Hans von Waldhorst. On his return to the inn, he dismissed his servants and

followers, distributing among them most of the trophies he had brought from the Holy Land.

His evening meal being finished, the landlord made bold to question him concerning his intentions. Conrad answered that he was now only a poor Knight Errant, with a single aim—that of punishing the murderer of his mother.

The landlord thereupon informed the young lord that a grand tournament was to be held within a week's time, in celebration of the twentieth anniversary of the birth of the Princess Ursula, only daughter of the Duke of Falkenstein. "The castle and the principality of Falkenstein," said he, "are already full of visitors. The Princess, whom I believe your worship's brother knew in her childhood, has grown up exceedingly beautiful. Many a knight has fought in her honor, hoping to win her favor, but as yet she has refused to bestow her hand on any." Conrad had been brought up at his father's side, and knighted by his ill-fated Emperor on the way to the Holy Land; but he remembered well having heard his brother, educated and knighted at Falkenstein, speak of this high-born and spirited girl.

As he again heard of her now renowned beauty, he decided to take part in the tournament in her honor, without giving more than a passing thought to the

possibility of finding favor in her eyes, being, then, only determined to make use of every opportunity to gain fame and fortune. Despite his sorrowful mood he determined to start on his journey the following morning.

"The sooner I mend my fortunes," he mused, "the sooner shall I be able to make war on Count Hans."

CHAPTER II.

FIGHTING THE ELEMENTS.

"The brook,
That with its silvery gleam comes leaping down
From the hillside, has, too, a tale to tell."
—*Mrs. Elliot.*

Shortly after sunrise on a morning in early Spring, that most beautiful of all the seasons in Germany, Conrad started on his journey to Falkenstein. The inn-keeper accompanied him across the Rhine as far as a mountain path, familiar to him from early childhood.

"As you are likely to remember, Sir Knight," said the man, "this path leads you, within two hours, to the bank of a rivulet, and by following its course upward a league or more, you will, near its source, reach a mill. The miller will direct you to a peasant living within two days' travel of the principality of Falkenstein. The castle of the powerful and treacherous Count von Waldhorst you will pass on your second day's journey; and its towers will be visible in the distance, through the trees on the opposite shore of the

river. The Count will not be likely to molest you, Sir Knight, nor indeed any other wayfarer just now, as it is hardly safe to cross the turbulent streams at this season."

"Would that I could meet him single-handed," replied the young Knight, "for I fear I shall have to bide my time ere I can encounter him in any other way. Take, to award thee, my friend, for thy care of me, and to keep away the evil spirits from thee, this little inlaid cross which I brought from the Holy Land, and which has been blessed by our Holy Father, the Pope." The inn-keeper departed; and ever after prized this gift beyond anything he possessed.

It was a lovely morning. The blossoms were out, diffusing their fragrance on the refreshing breeze. Our traveler's spirits rose in spite of himself. Saladin neighed. As Conrad patted his neck while unburdening his heart to him, the noble steed pricked up his ears and galloped on, seemingly proud of the load he bore. At mid-day they arrived at the mill. The miller's daughter happened to be standing at a window. Seeing the handsome cavalier approaching, she ran down and told her father that a beautiful knight of the Holy Cross was coming up the road. Glancing at herself in a mirror, she hastened to meet him. Conrad saluted the pretty maiden right gallantly. Ere long he was seated with father and daughter before a

simple meal, which, after his long morning ride, seemed a regal repast. His faithful Saladin enjoyed his measure of oats under a shady oak. At the end of a good hour's rest, he continued on his way. The miller's lass, making the excuse of pointing out the road, accompanied him for a short distance before bidding him a reluctant farewell. To the end of her days her mind held the image of the gallant young warrior.

About dusk Conrad reached the rustic dwelling described to him, situated near the banks of a turbulent river. The owner of this habitation did everything in his power to make the traveler comfortable; but he seemed, all the while, to be in great distress. He informed his noble guest that Count Hans von Waldhorst had made a raid upon him, a week before, carrying away one-half of his cattle and provision. "He will come again," continued the peasant, "and that all too soon. I thought that beyond bargaining with him from time to time for supplies, though at a disadvantage, I should be safe, for he dwells across the river; but I see now that in order to save the little that remains I shall be obliged to flee this part of the country. Oh, if the Baron von Rheinstein had been here, these things would never have happened!"

Conrad interrupted the poor farmer to tell him that he was the Baron's youngest son. "My father and my brother both lie buried in the Holy Land," added he;

"my home has been destroyed in my absence by this same miscreant, and I have sworn vengeance against him. I am but a penniless and wandering knight, but I trust speedily to retrieve my fortunes, and to punish this robber as he deserves."

"May God and the Holy Virgin be with you!" answered the simple peasant.

"Amen!" responded Conrad.

Saladin, to his utter disgust, spent that night in the same stall with a small donkey; but as the latter was not inclined to be sociable, the steed only silently protested. The next day the peasant took some pains to describe the road to be pursued by Conrad. "You will strike a mountain path in the afternoon, from which, far in the distance across the river, you will be able to descry the towers of Count Hans' castle. This path, which will eventually lead you to the broad road, becomes very intricate as it enters the wild woods, so it will require some care on your part not to lose it."

Conrad gave the last trinket he possessed to his kind entertainer, and started on his second day's journey. At noon he rested near a sparkling brook, where he partook of refreshments brought with him. Resuming his way, he soon struck the mountain path. His mind was so preoccupied with the part which he expected to take in the Falkenstein tournaments and with other, as yet indistinct, plans

for the future, that, for a time, he actually dismissed Hans von Waldhorst from his thoughts. He carefully followed the windings of the path before him, however. After an hour or two this became a more bewildering task than he had been led to anticipate, and eventually it wound through a wildly wooded region.

The air had become sultry. He observed dark clouds lowering above him. Gradually the heat became so oppressive that he divested himself of his armor and laid it across the horn of his saddle. Suddenly there came a great gust of wind, accompanied by thunder and lightning. A moment later, a furious storm was upon him. It grew so dark he could scarcely distinguish the path in its windings among the trees and and undergrowth. He was awestruck by the wild grandeur of his surroundings; but as the pelting rain was coming down in torrents, he felt it behooved him to find shelter. He decided to take refuge under the protecting branches of a huge oak; but just as he reached it, the lightning struck the giant of the forest, shivering it, and a fearful crash of thunder followed almost immediately. Both horse and rider felt the shock, the former making a wild leap into an adjacent thicket. Ere Conrad could control the plunging animal, his armor had been torn from the saddle, and they had become deeply entangled amongst the branches and undergrowth.

For a moment the Knight had been stunned; but on recovering himself he quickly looked about him. Everywhere high trees and the wildest maze underneath confronted him. Bruised and scratched, he dismounted, endeavoring to retrace his steps, but becoming more and more bewildered. The storm, continuing in all its fury, drenched him to the skin. After a while he succeeded in partly extricating himself and reaching a more sparsely wooded region. Here the ground being slippery and full of rocky holes, progress was necessarily slow. For nearly two weary hours did he vainly endeavor to find an outlet. At last, wet, hungry, and completely exhausted, he came to a dead halt. By this time night had set its seal in utter darkness. The wind and rain continued, though the lightning seemed more distant. By its aid Conrad suddenly caught a gleam of something bright through the trees, at the same moment he heard above the sounding of the wind the noise as of rushing water. Struggling on still farther, he reached the bank of a roaring torrent, which only added to his discomfiture and desolation.

For a few moments he stood irresolute. Below, through the distance, on the opposite shore, he saw a light. This seemed a beacon of hope. Hungry and shivering with cold, and Saladin trembling at his side, he felt there was but one course to pursue—to cross the raging torrent. Straining his eyes, a second time he saw the light. Though a long distance off, it was

the only sign of human habitation. He no longer hesitated; but, buckling his great sword behind his back, mounted Saladin and plunged into the foaming current. Before the gallant steed had taken many steps he lost his footing. Both horse and rider were carried irresistibly down the stream. Conrad endeavored to turn his horse's head toward the opposite shore, made visible now and then by the lightning. It seemed impossible. In persistently attempting this, he completely lost his hold on Saladin. Horse and rider were hopelessly separated. The current became stronger, diverging from the main stream into a narrow side channel, down which Conrad was carried with frightful velocity. An opportune flash revealed to him a black hole, about a hundred yards below him, by which the rushing waters were carried underground with a hissing noise that appalled him.

Commending his soul to God, the young Knight made one more desperate attempt to reach the shore. At that moment a dark object appeared in the water before him. It proved to be Saladin. Having secured a foothold on the rocky bottom he was plunging madly against the current.

With a final and well-nigh hopeless effort, Conrad succeeded in laying hold of the animal's tail, to which he clung with desperation. The noble beast seemed to comprehend the situation. With a vigorous plunge, he dragged his master out of the stream onto a slippery bank. Conrad had nearly lost consciousness during the last terrific struggle, but soon recovered.



With a vigorous plunge, he dragged his master out of the stream.



THE NEW YO
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Standing beside Saladin, he placed his arm around his preserver's neck, speaking endearing words to him, the noble steed shaking his dripping mane and nodding his head in response. After a short rest, horse and rider climbed up the bank, reaching a road with a downward grade, at the end of which lights were visible.

Leading his horse, he presently reached a drawbridge which had been lowered over a broad moat, as if in readiness for some arrival. Of the sentinel stationed there, he asked refuge from the storm. The man bade him follow; and crossing the bridge entered a courtyard, above which a huge pile of irregular bricks and towers loomed in the darkness. The sentinel stopped before a large iron door, giving three loud knocks. He was answered in a few moments by the appearance of a tall, handsome, but sinister looking man, of apparently two score and five years, partly clad in armor. After a searching look at Conrad this man bade him welcome, and called upon his servants to stable the young knight's horse. Saladin kicked and plunged, and even tried to bite the attendant. It required Conrad's own hand to lead him to the stall. There he rubbed his nose against his master, and neighed uneasily when left alone.

Conrad thought this exceedingly strange. On recalling the occurrence some time afterwards, he was convinced that the sagacious beast had had an instinctive foreboding of the evil that was to come.

CHAPTER III.

IN PRISON.

"A prison! heavens, I loathe the hated name.
.
Thou'rt every mischief crammed into one curse."
—*Tom Brown.*

Conrad found himself seated at a well-provisioned table in a large, low-ceilinged banquet hall. By the warmth of a huge fire which burned in a broad, overhanging chimney, his wet clothing rapidly dried, while a sense of comfort stole over his chilled frame. His tall host opposite him, sat silent and abstemious, yet he helped his guest plentifully to food and wine.

His voracious appetite appeased, Conrad felt physically revived, and under the potent influence of the wine became quite talkative. He voluntarily told his host his name, how he came to be on his way to the tournament at Falkenstein and had missed his road in the storm.

Before he had quite finished his recital, the reaction consequent on his desperate fight with the elements set in. He was soon overcome by a feeling of drowsiness.

His thoughts became so clouded that he did not notice the sudden change which spread over his host's dark visage.

Though sullen before, the man's brow now contracted into a portentous frown. He paced the room to and fro in ominous silence. When Conrad asked his name in return for his own, the dark knight made answer, his brow assuming so threatening an expression withal, that the guest might have become alarmed had not his dazed condition rendered him almost oblivious:

"I am an old knight, who knew well thy father, the Baron von Rheinstein, for many years. We have fought together in many a bout. I welcome thee, his son, to my castle; but I am somewhat whimsical and will not tell thee my name until tomorrow. Suffice it for the night that thou art my guest, and that I shall treat thee with true hospitality."

Conrad had become so drowsy that, sitting with eyes half closed, he failed to appreciate the full import of this speech. Making an incoherent reply, he requested to be shown to his room.

The tall, sinister knight offered to escort his guest, begging him at the same time to leave his sword that it might be dried and polished. The young Knight instinctively declined to do this, giving as a reason that the weapon had not left his side day nor

night since he had received it from the hands of his dying father. The host made no answer. Biting his lip, unnoticed by Conrad, he proceeded to lead him to his chamber. They traversed a long passage, climbed a flight of stairs and entered a small room which contained a couch, chair and table. A dull wood fire smoldered in the fireplace. Hanging the lamp he had brought on a hook over the table, and facing his guest irresolutely for a moment, the host left suddenly, without a word. In spite of all his drowsiness, this action struck Conrad as exceedingly strange. He listened to the heavy retreating footsteps, and laying his sword on the table, sat down to endeavor to collect his thoughts. Too sleepy to think clearly, however, he would have thrown himself at once on the couch, had not a vague sense of some coming evil taken possession of him. Suddenly, and for the first time that day, he thought of his enemy, Count Hans. Almost at the same moment a conviction flashed across his mind that his host, the very man under whose roof he found himself, was none other than his old, hereditary foe. Though he had never before seen him, something in his conduct as he now gradually recalled it made him sure that danger was nigh at hand. Instantly he became wide awake and on the alert. "Fool that I was," he exclaimed half aloud. "I must have been dazed indeed, thus to

have placed myself in this man's power. In spite of the peasant's warning, I find myself under the roof and at the mercy of the one human being in all the world against whom I have sworn deadly vengeance."

He sprang up instinctively and paced the floor. Going to the door he found it locked from the outside. From the window he looked out into the black night. The rain had ceased, but right beneath him he heard, for the second time that night, that strange hissing sound which told him that the water of the moat was there being carried underground as had been the case with the raging torrent from which he had so narrowly escaped with his life. He felt assured that should he contrive to lower himself down from the window, he would inevitably be drawn into that vortex. "I am indeed a hopeless prisoner, and at the mercy of my implacable enemy; but," he muttered between his teeth, "I will fight to the last, and sell my life dearly!"

Presently he fancied he heard footsteps approaching. In anticipation of some immediate danger, he grasped his sword, planting himself in the center of the room in an attitude of defense. As he thus stood, feeling the beating of his heart midst the noise of the hissing waters below, a faint knock startled him. He turned quickly toward the point whence it seemed to come; but only the bare wall confronted him. Another knock sounded, somewhat louder than the first. Conrad in-

voluntarily bade his unknown visitor enter. A secret panel opened slowly. The form of a young girl, clad in white flowing robes, met his astonished gaze. Her face, framed in long, dark, wavy tresses, was indescribably lovely. She was pale, and trembled visibly. Conrad at first thought her a vision of his own excited brain; but when he beheld the beautiful dark eyes and listened to the soft, musical words from those sweet lips, he knew that a lovely being, half child, half woman, stood before him.

"I have come to save thee, Sir Knight," said she. "Thy life is in danger. Follow me, there is no time to be lost." Motioning to Conrad to follow, the girl turned back to the secret door. He detained her, saying: I will not move until I know who thou art, and why thou wishest to save me?" Hesitating a moment, she answered, "I am Rosalie, daughter of Hans von Waldhorst. On account of something thou didst tell him tonight, he has worked himself into one of his relentless fits of fury, during which he knows not what he does. I overheard him giving orders to his men. I fear that if thou essayest to defend thyself they may kill thee."

"And what," asked Conrad, "will become of thee, fair maiden, when he finds that thou hast helped me to escape. Rather than that any harm should come to thee, I would stay and brave my fate."



"*I have come to save thee, Sir Knight,*" said she.



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"It would be useless," she replied, quickly; "besides, no one will know of my coming here, if thou wilt but follow me now."

She stood in an attitude so beseeching, extending her little white hand toward Conrad the while, that he no longer resisted. Grasping his sword firmly, he allowed her to lead him on. They entered a narrow passage, through which the trembling girl, feeling her way in the total darkness, silently guided her companion. Descending cautiously a flight of narrow, winding stairs, they halted at the head of another passage, when Rosalie, releasing Conrad's hand, whispered hurriedly: "I must leave thee here to proceed alone. Feel thy way against the wall on thy left, until thou reachest an open trap door—through it thou wilt gain the courtyard and the bridge beyond. Take the road to the right; follow the river downward until thou reachest a ferry opposite a Benedictine Monastery; there inquire thy way. Go at once. There is no time to be lost. May God speed thee!"

Ere Conrad could reply she was gone, leaving him alone in the darkness. He heard her light footsteps swiftly and softly ascending the winding-stairs. Carefully feeling his way toward the left, he moved forward as rapidly as possible. A faint light showed him that he was nearing the open trap door referred to by his gentle guide. He had not yet reached it, when

suddenly another door in the opposite wall was thrown open, and a flood of light betrayed him to those within. At the same time he recognized his whilom host and inveterate enemy, Count Hans von Waldhorst, advancing upon him at the head of a body of armed men. Realizing his danger, he ran swiftly to the trap door, sprang through it, and closed it behind him. Quickly crossing the courtyard, he gained the bridge. There, to his great dismay, he found himself confronted by a solid line of soldiery, belated retainers of the Count, returning from some predatory expedition. Behind him the harsh voice of his enraged enemy, hounding on his men to the capture of the fugitive, greeted his ears. Hemmed in on all sides, his chances of escape seemed desperate. His first impulse was to stand and, if need be, sell his life dearly. His second thought was in favor of discretion, since escape would be far preferable to death. This he essayed to effect by throwing himself over one side of the drawbridge, for the second time on that memorable night trusting himself to the treacherous waters. He felt himself tossed about by a whirlpool where the water burst into the moat. Holding his sword aloft in one strong hand, with the other he struck out boldly and succeeded in reaching a smoother current. It occurred to him that in case of pursuit the direction he had just taken would most naturally be followed by

his pursuers. Being veiled by the darkness, he turned and swam beneath the bridge close to the castle wall, where he gained a momentary foothold on a strong ledge. Buckling his sword once more across his back, he swam out, determined to continue on this altered course. A most fortunate move it proved; for on looking backward, he plainly descried the followers of Count Hans with torches, in the act of launching a boat, and saw them set out in the direction that he had first taken. With a vigorous stroke he rounded a turn in the moat, which effectually hid him from sight. Well-nigh exhausted by his efforts, he allowed himself to drift onward without knowing whither the current was bearing him; nor did he notice its increasing rapidity, until he realized suddenly, with a feeling of intensified alarm, that he was nearing the spot beneath the window of the room he had occupied in the castle, where the waters of the moat disappeared underground. He attempted to turn back and stem the current, but found it impossible. Three desperate strokes brought him against the perpendicular wall of the castle. On making a grasp at random in the darkness, his hand luckily fell upon a flat stone near the water's edge, which had a short iron post imbedded in it. His fingers tightened around this welcome hold, thus partially supporting his body as it rested upon the gliding water. After another struggle, he gained

a precarious foothold on the stony ledge. Though greatly exhausted he was safe for a moment and thanked God for a second escape from a watery grave.

What should he do next? The boat in which his enemies were pursuing him around the Castle, might even now be upon him. While in this desperate strait, with no apparent means of escape, an accident, or as he afterwards believed, a providential interposition, revealed to him a most unexpected place of concealment. Something hard fell upon his head, followed quickly by another piece. This he caught, and discovered it was dry mortar. Looking up he saw a light faintly reflected in the moist atmosphere. Feeling sure that it came from the window above him, he raised himself up as far as possible on his toes, reached to and grasped a ledge, drew himself upward and faced a narrow opening in the solid wall, from which all the bars save one had been removed. Here he was confronted by an alarmed human face, looking from a prison cell within. Seizing the remaining iron bar, he raised himself to the level of the window, and forced his way, with the greatest difficulty, into this unexpected hiding-place.

Scarcely had his feet touched the floor, and ere he had time to speak to the occupant of the gloomy retreat, his ear caught the voices of his pursuers as they pulled their boat along this most dangerous part of

the moat by means of the iron posts imbedded in the flat stones, which were placed at intervals for a considerable distance along the Castle wall. A moment later he had been lost. Listening intently, he caught the words of the following colloquy, uttered in gruff tones of disappointment. Said one, "He must have been swallowed up in yonder hole. It will hardly pay us to look any further." Said another, "He may have found a foothold on one of the stones farther on. We had better explore the entire moat. I am grievously thirsty though, for the smoke of these damned torches has gotten into my throat! Devil a bite or a sip will we get from the mad Count if we return without our game." The last words were scarcely audible; soon they died away completely in the distance.

Conrad now turned to the prisoner on whose solitude he had so unceremoniously intruded. In the dim light of a miserable lamp, he saw, confronting him, a middle-aged man of commanding presence and noble features, who regarded him with mute astonishment. The young Knight spoke first, inquiring the name of his fellow prisoner.

"I am the Duke of Falkenstein," replied the latter, "imprisoned here by the treacherous Baron Hans von Waldhorst. And who art thou, young sir? How camest thou to enter by that window which I had prepared for my escape this very night?" Conrad, as-

tounded to find himself face to face with the Duke at whose castle the tournaments to which he had been hastening were to be held, rapidly told him everything, adding that thanks to the timely removal of those bars he had been able to elude his pursuers. Duke Henry expressed himself as overjoyed, even under such unfortunate circumstances, at meeting a son of his old friend, the Baron von Rheinstein, and the brother of the favorite young squire who had been brought up and knighted at Falkenstein previous to his ill-fated departure to the Holy Land.

"I had hoped," he continued, "to have escaped this very night, but I have partaken such meager fare since my confinement, that after the exertion of breaking out those bars I am too weak to continue the attempt."

"Count Hans," the nobleman continued, "a former friend of mine, met me at the chase, as he had done before. This time he asked me for the hand of my daughter, and on my refusal, fell into a violent rage, which culminated in a mad paroxysm the like of which I had never seen. The result was that, by taking me unawares, he overcame my few attendants and myself, and imprisoned us. He hopes in this way to force my consent. Meanwhile my daughter must be undergoing the greatest anxiety on my account. About four days from this time, as near as I can tell, having but imperfectly kept the record during my confine-

ment, the tournament in honor of her birthday is to take place. I ought to have returned two weeks ago. She has undoubtedly sent messengers after me in all directions, including this place; but Count Hans has assuredly denied all knowledge of me. He expects my final answer tomorrow, and I know not what he will do if I refuse his wish. For that reason I tried to escape, breaking out those bars with the help of the implements in yonder corner, smuggled in to me by the Count's daughter, Rosalie, the same brave damsel who released thee. My confinement, alas, has rendered me unable to proceed. The Count knows of my weak condition," continued the Duke, in a feeble voice, "and he hopes to profit by it. If I give him a favorable answer on the morrow, it is arranged that we proceed to Falkenstein together, and the festivities can still take place. But what of my promise to give her to him in marriage? I feel sure that she would never willingly consent, and I would never force her against her will." The Duke ceased speaking, being quite exhausted, and stretched himself at full length on his bed of straw, which was spread upon the bare stone floor.

Conrad reflected for a few moments on what he had heard; then he said, "We are both on our way to Falkenstein, noble Duke, and I propose that we start together this very night. Delay is dangerous. Should the Count, who believes me to be drowned, find me

with thee, my lord, here in the prison, no one can tell what would be the consequence. We might fight; but what chance would we have, almost unarmed, against this man and his band of hirelings? We must escape this very night. I am strong enough to take thee with me."

"Alas, young sir," answered the Duke, "thou wilt never be able to take me. Go thyself and report to my daughter, who will without delay take measures to obtain my liberty."

"What," cried Conrad; "go and leave thee, my lord, here at his mercy? Never! Fear not, good sir! I have faith in our success."

After a while the Duke yielded to the young man's entreaties; but only on condition that, if he himself on their way should feel unable to proceed, Conrad should go alone. To this arrangement the latter agreed; but with the inward reservation that, come what might, he would never desert his father's old friend.

Duke Henry showed him a double hook with a long line attached, which Rosalie had smuggled in to him, intended to enable him to reach the rocky wall which surrounded the moat.

Conrad set to work at once, practicing the throwing of the rope so as to fasten it to the window ledge above, while the Duke, stretched at ease on his pallet, continued to talk about his treacherous friend, Count Hans.

"Hans von Waldhorst," said he, "has, besides the daughter thou hast seen, a son older than she, named Hugo, and also an adopted child, who, in her way, is a most remarkable girl. His wife, as fair and good a woman as one might find, died some years ago. Since then Count Hans has been a changed man. My daughter knows him well, and though she has shown no violent dislike toward him, has not favored his suit. He has held his own in the lists until lately, when he met more than his match in a gigantic Pomeranian prince, also an aspirant for the hand of the Princess Ursula. She is as averse, however, to the latter's suit as to that of the wily Count. Rosalie, the Count's own daughter, is a lovely, brave little maid. Hugo, her brother, a noble lad, and the only one able to exercise any control over their father, remains, alas, for weeks at a time, absent in the forest with Volga, that wild child of the woods, in ignorance of his father's doings. Would that Count Hans were dead, if only for the sake of his children! If we but succeed in our escape, Conrad von Rheinstein, we will teach him a lesson which he will never forget. One who has so treacherously broken the laws of hospitality and so cruelly detained me here, deserves the severest punishment! What sayest thou?"

"Yes," said Conrad; "and let me add—one who has destroyed my ancestral castle and killed my mother shall have that punishment meted out to him!"

CHAPTER IV.

THE ESCAPE.

"There's no impossibility to him
Who stands prepared to conquer every hazard."
—*Mrs. Hale.*

Shortly before the hour of twelve on that dismal night, while the howling wind was still chasing black clouds over the towers of Waldhorst Castle, two figures emerged cautiously from the narrow prison window, the last bar of which had been removed. Lowering themselves down the massive wall, their feet rested upon a flat stone projecting just above the water's edge, which, as we have seen, adjoined others extending for a considerable distance along the inner wall of the moat. Stepping from one to the other they reached the last, from which they lowered themselves into the water. The cold shock gave the elder of the two fugitives, Duke Henry von Falkenstein, a sudden chill, which rendered him incapable of action. Conrad came to his assistance. Bidding him carry his sword while placing one hand on his shoulder for

support, he swam with him across the moat. There he at once threw the hook, hoping to make it catch on the top of the outer rocks, but failed. Again he threw it, and again missed his aim. Suddenly the Duke released him, crying: "Conrad, I can hold on no longer! Take thy sword and save thyself!" Our hero was at his side in a moment. Taking the weapon cross-wise between his teeth, and supporting the Duke with his left hand, he made ready for another throw. During that time the current had been carrying them slowly backward toward the threatening hole, and Conrad fully realized their immediate danger. Gathering all his strength for a supreme effort, he made the third throw. Fortunately the hook caught; at the same moment, he knew by the dead weight resting on his arm that the Duke had lost consciousness.

He threw his sword ashore, and quickly grasping the rope, fastened its end around the now helpless body of his companion. Hand over hand he climbed to the bank above. This was a difficult feat, but a still more arduous task awaited him. Not a moment was to be lost. He was obliged to stand close to the moat's edge to lift the body of the Duke which, in its utter helplessness, with the saturated clothing, seemed a weight of lead. Great beads of perspiration stood on Conrad's brow, as, leaning over far enough to let him swing clear of the wall, he raised and landed his still

unconscious friend safely on the bank beside him. Hardly waiting to get his breath, he picked up his sword, shouldered the Duke and started with him for some trees near by. While staggering along, he saw a light not far off, coming from some human habitation.

As he approached the spot it proved to be a miserable wooden hut built against a rock. He perceived the figure of a woman standing in the doorway. A dog sprang at them, barking furiously; and as Conrad turned to drive him off, he nearly lost his balance; but recovering quickly, carried his burden unceremoniously into the hut.

To his astonishment, the woman welcomed him in a most friendly manner, calling him by name, and adding that she had been expecting both him and the Duke of Falkenstein.

Conrad placed his companion before the roaring fire in the center of the hut, the smoke of which escaped through a hole in the roof directly above. A kettle steamed over the flames, diffusing a most agreeable odor throughout the room. Before he had recovered sufficient breath to speak, the woman, who seemed prepared for everything, had filled an earthen vessel from the contents of the kettle. Pouring out a part of it, which she allowed to cool for a moment, she succeeded in making the unconscious visitor swallow the draught. Its beneficial effect became appar-

ent at once. Soon after, under the additional influence of the warmth from the fire, the Duke opened his eyes and asked where he was.

"With a friend," replied the woman; "the 'Witch of Waldhorst' so-called, I know not why, unless it be that I cure the sick and foretell some of the events that happen in yonder castle. I knew that you, my lord, and your noble companion would escape from Count Hans tonight. I expected you here."

While she was speaking, Conrad looked about the hut, discovering in it an old table, one chair besides that in which the Duke sat, and a pile of rubbish in one corner. He now observed the woman more closely. Tall, though considerably shrunken by age, she still retained traces of former beauty; but the wan features, wild lustrous eyes, toothless mouth, and the rags in which she was clad, made a most weird picture. The Duke asked her how she came to know of their imprisonment and escape.

"I read the firmament," she answered. "I watch an evil star which follows Count Hans von Waldhorst. The time is nearing when he will suffer for his iniquities. He once professed to love me, then expelled me from yonder castle and married me to one of his vassals. My husband, and a son whom I loved, met their death at his hand. I am sworn to avenge them. I was not always what you see me now. I was beautiful

once, and dwelt a lady in yonder castle. Now I am old and ugly and have but a short time to live; but, mark my words, before I die Count Hans will meet his fate! and I shall be there to see him suffer."

The woman had drawn herself up to her full height, as with raised hands and flashing eyes she spoke these words; but suddenly her attitude changed into one of listening. The dog barked. "Someone is coming," she cried; "quick, my Lord, and you, Sir Knight; you must not be found here!"

She assisted the Duke in rising, and pulled him and Conrad into the corner, where, pushing aside a seemingly solid mass, which, to their astonishment, proved to be a number of articles cunningly secured together so as to resemble an accidental accumulation of rubbish, she disclosed a niche in the rocky wall, large enough to hold the two fugitives. Hurrying them into this space, she replaced the barrier, effectually concealing them.

A moment later, Rosalie, the Count's daughter, ran, pale and trembling, into the hut, her figure thinly clad, her dark hair floating at her back. The dog greeted her with a bark of joyful recognition.

"Oh, save me!" she panted, beseechingly. "My father is pursuing me—he has discovered that I helped his captives to escape, and is beside himself with rage. I fear for my life!"

Voices were heard at the door, which the old woman, with great presence of mind, had locked while Rosalie was yet speaking. She now pulled and pushed the girl, in all haste, into the same small space behind the barrier, where the Duke and Conrad were hidden.

We can imagine the girl's astonishment, when by the flickering light, she recognized the young knight whom she believed to have been drowned, and Duke Henry. As the barrier closed behind her, she found herself almost thrust into Conrad's arms.

Before either of them could speak, words were heard within the hut. Rosalie, recognizing her father's voice, listened with a terrified heart.

They heard Count Hans, in a voice of thunder, demand his daughter of the witch.

"Tell me where she is," he cried, "or I will kill thee!"

"What know I of thy daughter, Count Hans?" boldly replied the witch, the dog meanwhile, at her bidding having retired growling into a corner. "Is she fleeing from thee, her father? How can I protect her from such as thou? Guilty as thou art of so many crimes, does thy wrath extend even to thine own child? For shame, Count Hans! Beware! I tell thee thy punishment is at hand!"

The Count, though shaken for a moment by the woman's fearless manner, cried out with renewed fury: "Hold thy tongue, old hag, or I will tear it out! I will

burn thee and thy old hut together. Here, ye rascals! bring the torches and fire this damned den."

They paused involuntarily, however, as the witch with flashing eyes confronted them, exclaiming: "Hold! have a care, Count Hans! If thou dare harm me thou shalt be struck dead this very night. I tell thee I have read it in the stars of heaven. Thou shalt be struck dead at midnight, and my ghost shall be present to see thee die!"

She concluded this startling address with an unearthly laugh, and perceiving its effect on the Count, she added: "Thou art a coward! Thou darest not destroy me!" And she laughed so hideously that the Count and his followers shuddered.

In another moment, however, the enraged Knight regained courage and struck the woman so violent a blow with his clenched fist that she dropped to the ground at his feet. Hurling a volley of oaths at her prostrate form, he cried to his men: "I have no time to listen to such accursed trash. Move on, ye rascals—search the forest."

He left the hut, closing the door after him with such violence that it almost fell from its hinges. Raising herself on one hand, the old woman listened to the retreating footsteps; then, thanking God for having been able to conceal the fugitives so effectually, reaction followed and she sank back in a dead swoon.



They paused involuntarily, however, as the witch with flashing eyes confronted them.



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The three fugitives, caged in their narrow space, had heard every word spoken in the hut. Conrad was tempted several times to force back the frail barrier and confront the Count, but Rosalie prevented him. Now that everything was still, they wondered why they were not released. They tried gently to push back the screen, but found that it was secured on the outside.

"Do not let us force our way out yet," said the Duke; "we might find ourselves in a worse place."

Conrad coincided mentally in this opinion; for notwithstanding the danger of their position, he could not fail to appreciate the romantic situation of being in such close neighborhood to the sweet child, who on that night and at her own peril, had rescued him from so great a danger. He took her soft little hand in his, and she did not withdraw it.

The naturally damp and close atmosphere of their narrow retreat was greatly relieved by an opening over what seemed a wooden partition at their back, which served as a ventilator, and through which they heard, afar off, the roaring of water.

Duke Henry first called the attention of his fellow fugitives to this distant noise, wondering the while what lay beyond that wooden wall. He then asked Rosa'ie how it happened that she also had to fly from her father.

In a voice still trembling with excitement she told them that her father had first suspected her brother Hugo, who had returned from the forest that night, of having aided Conrad's escape. When her father accused the boy, he denied it so emphatically that the Count, despite his fury, believed him. As Hugo, later on, sat in his sister's chamber listening to her excited recital of all that had occurred, the Count, who had just discovered in the secret dust-covered passages the footsteps of herself and Conrad, suddenly confronted them, his face livid with rage.

Whether or not it was his intention to do bodily harm to his daughter they were not at all sure; but he swore so horribly and advanced toward her in so threatening a manner and with so wild a look that she sprang from her couch in terror. As her father again turned upon her, Hugo, now thoroughly alarmed, threw himself between them. Being unable to appease the madman by words, he seized hold of him, calling to his sister to fly. Taking only time to put on her shoes and throw a light mantle around her, she fled out of the castle.

"You know the rest," said she; "and you can imagine how astonished and rejoiced I was to find you both alive. I hope that no harm came to my brother. God alone knows what will become of us," she added, bursting into tears.

Conrad yearned to kiss away her tears, and as Rosalie with great difficulty raised her hand to dry them, he sought to place his own strong arm around her by way of consoling as well as protecting her. Her close proximity to the barrier, however, rendered this impossible. He was forced to content himself with raising her little hand to his lips.

"Listen, dear Rosalie," said the Duke; "should we make good our escape and reach Falkenstein, I shall desire to have thee remain with us. My daughter will welcome thee as a sister, and my wife will cherish thee as a daughter." The maiden expressed her gratitude with an overflowing heart; but added hesitatingly that she thought it her duty to return to her father as soon as his fit of madness passed away.

"No, my child," answered Duke Henry; "not for the present, at all events. Thou must tarry with us. What sayest thou, Sir Knight?"

"I will be a brother to Rosalie," answered Conrad; "she has saved my life and I shall devote mine to her in return."

As he spoke he affectionately pressed the hand still resting in his own. She, in return, pressed his to her heart. She had thought him dead, this tall, splendid young Knight; and in the joy of finding him alive, displayed her feelings with the childlike directness and innocence, which was not misunderstood by Con-

rad's chivalric nature. For the time being, finding herself so near him, a sense of belonging to him took possession of Rosalie—a feeling which she did not try to explain to herself.

Everything remained quiet without. The Duke now believed that it would be safe to at least partially force back the light barrier, and look into the cabin.

At this moment the sound of a cough reached their ears, which caused them to pause. It proceeded from the old woman, who under the ceaseless efforts of her dog in licking her hands and face, was recovering from her swoon. In a few moments she fully revived, and her thoughts reverted to the fugitives. Not knowing how long she had been unconscious, nor what might have happened meanwhile, she tottered across the room to the hiding place, and after some difficulty in unfastening the barrier, pushed it back with her trembling hands.

Rosalie would have fallen backward had not Conrad caught her in his arms. He would gladly have kept her there; but all their attention was instantly attracted by the significant movements of the witch. Entering the niche as they vacated it, she opened a door in the rear, saying, "There lies your way of escape. This is the entrance to an underground passage, which leads to a long cave through which the waters from the moat are carried toward the river.

The waterway, which is partly the work of nature, my husband and son assisted in constructing. The passage which leads to it was secretly built by my boy. At the end of it you will find, fastened to a stone in a small natural haven formed by protruding rocks, two boats, also built by him, and meant for our joint escape, had he lived. Take the first and larger of these—it will carry you safely through the cave to the channel and down the main river. By letting yourselves drift, as you must needs do, you will reach the Benedictine Monastery an hour before noon. There abandon the boat. It will have served a noble cause. I shall no longer need it."

The Duke, who, with his companions, had listened attentively to the old woman's directions, now took her withered hand, saying: "We owe thee our liberty, good woman. To repay thee for thy goodness we will do all in our power for thy future comfort and happiness. Come with us. I will gladly care for thee to the end of thy days."

"You can do nothing for me, noble Duke," answered the woman. "I am already paid if you but succeed in making your escape. My days are numbered. I shall live long enough to see Count Hans breathe his pitiful last. Forgive me, sweet Mistress Rosalie," she added, "for speaking thus of thy father; but he and I have some accounts to settle. Fate has

decreed in what manner this shall be done. None of his children shall suffer by it."

After delivering this mysterious speech she stepped back into the cabin and poured out for each of her guests a glass of the same liquid which had so wonderfully revived the Duke. She also placed two bottles of it, and some food, in an old basket, which she handed, together with a lighted lamp, to Conrad. To Rosalie she gave, to protect her from the night air, a blanket from her couch. The girl at first declined to take it, but the old woman insisted, saying: "Thy life is more precious than mine, dear child." Then, being anxious that the fugitives should get beyond the reach of their enemies under cover of the night, she bade them farewell, commending them to God's keeping.

The Duke reminding her that she would always find a friend and protector in him, they entered the passage, Conrad and Rosalie taking the lead.

As the door closed behind them, the old woman stepped back into the cabin. Throwing herself upon her cheerless couch, without a blanket to cover her, she lay by the dying embers of the fire, shivering and coughing for several hours. At length she fell into a troubled sleep, calling loudly upon Count Hans and her son in her dreams.

CHAPTER V.

DRIFTING.

"Oh! how impatience gains upon the soul,
When the long promised hour of joy draws near!
How slow the tardy moments seem to roll!"

—*Mrs. Tighe.*

The fugitives descended with their flickering light, amid the re-echoing thunders of the torrent that rushed through the cave, and found the two boats fastened securely among sheltering rocks.

Conrad, having selected the larger one, was in the act of stepping into it, when a sudden gust of air extinguished their lamp, compelling him to grope in utter darkness. On securing a firm foothold in the stern of the boat, he reached out his hand first for the Duke, whom he conducted to a seat in the bow, and then for Rosalie, who, much frightened, crouched down at his feet. Seating himself, he wrapped the blanket around the young girl, and laying hold of the rudder, pushed the boat off.

In a few seconds they were caught by the sweep-

ing current, and tossed about in a fearful manner. Conrad was obliged to release the rudder so as to hold on to both sides of the creaking craft. Rosalie turning half around, clung to his knee in terror, while the Duke, warned by Conrad, laid down prone on the bottom of the boat.

Through the tumult and appalling darkness the craft flew on at a terrible rate. A long distance off they descried the opening at the end of the cave, a small glimmer as yet, but standing out brightly amid the surrounding blackness. Gradually the current became less violent. Rosalie released her hold and turned to look at the opening. The nearer they approached the larger it grew; and after a quarter of an hour's rapid drifting, the boat shot through it, under a sky from which all vestige of the late storm had disappeared. Conrad suggested that a clear night was a good omen, the first words spoken since they started, save his warning to the Duke. Turning to the maiden, he asked, "Thou art no longer afraid, art thou, fair Rosalie?"

"I clung to thee because I was in terror in that fearful cave; but from that moment I knew no fear," she answered. Lifting her dark eyes to his in the starlight, she added: "I feel safe when near thee."

"I would shed my last drop of blood to protect thee from danger!" warmly answered Conrad.

"May the Holy Virgin bless thee, Sir Knight," replied the girl with emotion.

In the swollen channel, along which they were now drifting, the water became somewhat smoother, and when they entered the river the boat became quite steady, though still carried onward with considerable speed.

Conrad suggested to his companions that they should try to sleep. The girl, seated at his feet, acting on the suggestion, turned and leaned back against him, while he wrapped the blanket more closely around her. As she slept, her head gradually sank until it rested on the knee which previously supported her.

The Duke, still suffering from exhaustion, stretched himself in the bow and was soon lost in dreams. Conrad alone sat erect, rudder in hand, steadying and guiding the drifting craft in its course down the winding river. Feeling chilly from exposure to the night air, he reached for a bottle out of the witch's basket and took a long draught, which warmed his blood through and through. He watched the shore on either side with its dark masses of trees in the foreground and dimly perceptible hills in the distance, yet felt no inclination to sleep, though his limbs were weary; nor could he have even changed his position without running the risk of awakening Rosalie.

As hour after hour passed in this quiet monotony,

while his friends were still wrapped in deepest slumber, he meditated over his past and wondered as to the future. The boat was now drifting quite gently though swiftly toward its destination; but the young pilot little dreamed that his bark of life also, guided by a higher power, was drifting toward its ultimate fate.

Gradually a faint glow was seen in the east, dimly unfolding to his eyes the surrounding landscape. Presently, the first rays of the peeping sun shot across space, masses of light followed, and soon the life giving orb of day, in yet subdued splendor, stood above the horizon, flooding everything with roseate hues.

After watching for some time the birth and gradual growth of a glorious day, Conrad looked down upon Rosalie's face, with her beautiful hair glowing in the sunlight, and he could not remove his gaze from the enchanting vision. She had not changed her position, still leaning heavily against him, with upturned face and lips slightly parted. As he looked, he heard the singing of birds, the sporting of fish, and the rush of startled deer from their drinking places, but he heeded them not; his eyes were only for Rosalie. "A mere child," murmured he, "but she is passing lovely."

The air became warmer and charged with delicious fragrance of wild opening buds which fringed the river banks. At last the young Knight looked up, drawing

a long ecstatic breath as he marked the beautiful landscape with its ever varying changes at each turn of the river. The sunlight was dancing on the water, butterflies were hovering in air, and the tuneful lark high on the wing greeted the new born day. All nature seemed in its happiest mood.

Conrad was intoxicated by the scene. As he looked down again at the lovely child nestled against him, she stirred, disengaging her arms from the blanket. He would have further relieved her, but in attempting to do so, he became painfully aware that the leg which for so many hours had supported the sleeper, had in turn gone fast asleep.

Feeling that it was a pity she should still be oblivious to all the beautiful scenes through which they were passing, he thought of an experiment which might arouse the slumberer and at the same time relieve him from his painful position. Suiting the action to the thought, he bent down and kissed her.

She slowly opened her eyes. Placing her arms around her protector's neck, she kissed him in return in so spontaneous and innocent a manner that his heart went out to her as to a sweet appealing child. As she looked up, her face seemed in full harmony with the beauty of that spring morning.

By this time the Duke had awakened, much refreshed by his sound sleep, and suggested that some-

thing in the way of a morning meal would be welcome; whereupon Conrad and Rosalie unpacked the old witch's provision basket. The simple meal in the balmy sunlight was enjoyed by them as only those can enjoy, who have passed together through dangers such as theirs, and are drifting toward happy days to come.

Rosalie as yet hardly realized that she had actually deserted her home and cast her lot among comparative strangers; but even at this early stage of their acquaintance she felt toward Conrad as though she had always known him. The novelty and beauty of her surroundings filled her with an ecstasy of delight.

The sun rose higher and higher in the heavens. Soft winds wafted toward them from the shore, which receded more and more as the boat floated down the expanding river.

At last the Benedictine Monastery loomed up in the distance. The Duke gave an exclamation of delight, and directed Conrad to steer for a little wharf at the foot of the Monastery grounds.

CHAPTER VI.

THE ABBOT.

"Trust reposed in noble natures
Obliges them the more."

—*Dryden.*

An hour before noon, the time predicted by the Witch of Waldhorst, our friends landed. Crossing the road they entered the gate to the Monastery grounds, stretching along the side of a hill partly covered by vineyards. On its summit, enclosed by an inner stone wall, stood the extensive Monastery buildings. In the ascent, half-way to this renowned Benedictine retreat, they rested at a small pavilion which commanded a good view of the river and bordering country.

The Duke pointed out, in the distance, the Convent of St. Agnes, and nearer to the left, the ruins of a castle still formidable in appearance. "Those," he said, "are the remains of the former stronghold of the Baron von Grunau, which was destroyed fifteen years ago by Hans von Waldhorst, during a feud with its

owner. The Abbot of the Monastery, a redoubtable warrior in his day, and a still well-preserved and able-bodied man, is a twin brother of the deceased Baron. If I mistake not, he is coming down the hill to meet us. He must have perceived our approach."

Several monks were seen coming toward them. As they drew near, one of their number, a tall, heavily built ecclesiastic, greeted the Duke with exclamations of delight, who presented him as "His Holiness the Abbot." Notwithstanding his red face and nose, there was a certain distinguished air about this man, while a humorous and good-natured expression shone out of his small grey eyes.

After giving vent to his joy at seeing his friend, Duke Henry, whom every one far and near had given up as dead, alive and well, his reverence bestowed a curious glance on the fugitives whose apparel showed the severe usage it had been put to. Rosalie, however, in her hastily donned and somewhat scanty attire, her glossy hair hanging in dishevelled masses over her shoulders, looked so fresh and lovely withal that the Abbot became enchanted, and his eyes dwelt frequently on her beauty during the Duke's exciting account of their late adventures.

Before he could make any comments on the narrative, Duke Henry requested that a messenger be immediately sent to Falkenstein Castle.

Accordingly, a lay brother left the Monastery, mounted on a donkey which his reverence guaranteed would out-travel any horse. By this timely messenger the Duke sent divers instructions to his wife and daughter, making known his desire that the tournament in honor of the Princess should, at all hazards, take place at the appointed time.

Rosalie found shelter at the Convent of St. Agnes, where the Duke's daughter had been educated. The Abbot escorted the young girl, personally delivering her into the hands of the Abbess.

As it was contrary to a law of the but recently reorganized Benedictine order to receive anyone within the Monastery, save in cases of extreme illness or distress, two beds for the accommodation of Conrad and the Duke were ordered to be placed in the old banquet hall of the ruins of Grunau, the one room still habitable. Of this the Abbot informed his guests, suggesting that after refreshments they should go and inspect their quarters for the night.

The mid-day meal was served at the pavilion overlooking the river. The Abbot joined them, tasting several bottles of the best wine, "to test its condition." Savory dishes from the Monastery kitchen were set before the guests, and soon their overtaxed energies were fully restored.

Several times during the repast, the Abbot referred

to "that detestable Count Hans' lastest doings," and informed his friends that messengers had crossed and recrossed the ferry to and from the Black Forest and Waldhorst Castle without bringing any tidings whatever of their master, the Duke. "This miscreant," continued the Monk, "will never pause in his mad career. It was he, Sir Knight, who in sheer wantonness, destroyed yonder castle, although Duke Henry seems of the opinion that it was done in justifiable warfare."

"I shall believe anything of this man hereafter," put in Duke Henry; "his latest outrage, against me and this young Knight, deserves swift retribution. We hope soon to deal it out to him. Rosalie, also a fugitive from her father's wrath, I have resolved to adopt, and shall take her with me to Falkenstein."

"She seems one of the sweetest of Nature's uncultivated flowers," interposed the Abbot.

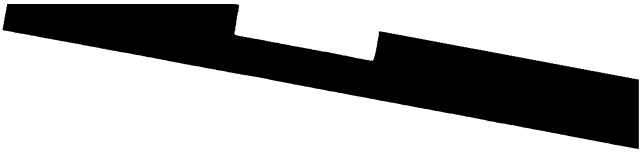
"As gallant as ever," answered the Duke. "If thou, holy father, dost wish to make further study of this interesting blossom, perhaps thou wilt go and beg the Abbess to let her join us at our evening meal."

"With thy leave, holy father," remarked Conrad, "I will accompany thee."

The smiling recluse gave a gracious assent to his newly made friend's request, saying: "A handsome young Knight's company will prove more acceptable



"It was he, Sir Knight, who in sheer wantonness destroyed yonder castle."



THE N.W.P.
P.L.

to this sweet young maiden than that of an ugly old Monk like myself."

This man, who plays an important part in our story, in the time of his early manhood, had been a famous courtier and gallant until his flitting affections became fixed upon one object, a noble lady, whose image he yet cherished in fondest love; but alas! she had been snatched from him by the redoubtable Count Hans, who made her his wife.

Immediately after their marriage, the disappointed lover renounced the world, entered the Benedictine Order and rose rapidly to the position he then occupied in one of the largest monasteries in Germany, connected with the Convent of St. Agnes. But the Abbot had never quite forgiven Hans von Waldhorst.

During the afternoon Conrad reminded his Reverence of the proposed visit to the ruins of Grunau. When they arrived at the dilapidated stronghold they found the banquet room a gloomy looking place. High backed chairs, skeleton heads of deer, and two wooden effigies, covered with suits of mail, looked spectral in the dim light which struggled through the begrimed casements.

On one of the panels of the wall, they noticed a miserable painting of an old knight in armor, bearing some resemblance in its crude features to the Abbot, and looking even more disagreeably ghostlike than its

wooden companions. The inspection of the couches, however, proved them to be comfortable, and gave promise of a good night's rest.

Duke Henry drew the attention of the Abbot to the likeness existing between him and the picture on the wall.

"That abominable caricature," his reverence said, "is meant to be the portrait of my twin brother, the former Lord of Grunau, who, as you know, fell defending his castle. The picture was painted partly from memory and partly from my own ugly face, after his death. We were much alike in our younger days, and the Italian Monk who produced this thought that I might answer for his model. The poor fellow has since died, whether from shame at having executed so abominable a piece of work or for want of anything to live for, I know not. I am determined to have the panel removed, however, and to use it for firewood some day, although it is the only existing likeness of my brother."

"I think," said the Duke, smiling, "that face much uglier than yours, and your brother, the Baron, was a fine looking man."

"Yes, although like me, better looking than I," replied the Abbot with a humorous twinkle in his eyes; "but when we were young together, while he *looked* at

the fair dames I *talked* to them, and many a time did I win them away from him."

"I remember that time well," said Duke Henry, "and I could tell thee, Sir Knight, many stories about those twins. My reverend friend here was a formidable rival of his brother until he fell in love with the beautiful girl who was carried off before his eyes by our common enemy, Hans von Waldhorst. Up to that time, he had eyes and words only for her. It was a sad ending to your love dreams, holy father."

"I have not forgotten it, my lord," replied the Benedictine, "but I have prayed that I might forgive the man. He has, however, added a chapter of high-handed outrages so much more cruel and wicked than that which blighted my life, that I cannot feel the charity toward him which I ought, in deep humility, to exercise toward all men."

Meanwhile Rosalie had been received most kindly by the Abbess at the Convent, and was so charmed by everything there, that, after thinking long and deeply over the ordeals in store for her in accompanying the noble Duke and her newly found friend, Conrad, to Falkenstein, she had resolved to ask the Duke's and the Abbess' consent to enter the Convent as a pupil. When Conrad called for her without the Abbot, the lady superior of the Convent allowed Rosalie to accom-

pany him, and during their walk back she informed him of her resolution.

"At the end of a year, Sir Knight," she said, "I shall be better fitted to take the place of a daughter to the Duke and Duchess of Falkenstein, should they still wish to adopt me. I should now feel strange, indeed, and ashamed to meet the Princess, for I know but little of courtly ways."

"Rosalie!" replied our hero, who had not realized until then what a wrench it would be to part from this fair child, "thou little knowest how it grieveth me to hear of this decision. We have been thrown together by fate, and it seemeth to me that we should not be separated at a time like this. Did I not promise to remain near thee?"

"Thou didst," replied the girl, turning her soft, moist eyes up to his; "and I would love to be with thee always; but," she added in a trembling voice, "it will be best that I remain here. Thou art going to enlist in the tournament in honor of the Princess Ursula, who, they say, is not only a most spirited lady, but more beautiful than words can express and as tender hearted as she is bewitching. If thou art victorious in the tilts, thou wilt have gained the right to her hand, and in that case, what will I, an ignorant little girl, be to thee?"

"Rosalie! dear Rosalie! do not speak thus," pro-

tested Conrad. "It doth not follow that I shall ask the Princess for her hand, even should I gain the right, which I doubt, or that, should I ask her she would grant it. But whatever may chance, I will never forget thee."

"What thou sayest," replied the girl, "makes me happy. Yet I cannot believe that I should be happy at Falkenstein; certainly not if—" here she stopped. Conrad observed the quivering lip, then, after watching her face for a few moments, said: "It shall be as thou wishest, Rosalie. Perhaps it will be best for thee to remain at the Convent, for the present, to study. I will call for thee at the end of a year. And," he added after another pause, during which the girl watched his face eagerly, "I have a firm belief that thy life and mine are to be woven together in the future. Whatever we may go through for a time while separated, I will surely return to thee."

He said this solemnly, a dim unaccountable presentiment of future events flashing the while across his mind. "My heart is thine already and will be always," simply replied Rosalie. Conrad, much moved, with great gallantry impressed a kiss on the fair forehead of his young companion. They continued their way to the pavilion in silence, sitting down, still hand in hand, to await the Duke's arrival.

The sun hung low in the horizon. It was the hour

when lovers need no language to commune with each other. As yet Conrad's feelings for Rosalie were undefined, having been enlisted so suddenly during their romantic adventure. Much more deeply stirred was the heart of the young girl. All that was said and felt in that hour was long remembered by her. The young Knight forgot it much sooner, among new and varied scenes of love and triumph.

During the repast which followed, Duke Henry gave his approval to Rosalie's entrance into the convent as one of its pupils. He wrote certain directions to the Abbess, on parchment, which he requested the Abbot to deliver the following day. The good prelate promised to do his friend's bidding and, moreover, to make inquiry from time to time as to Rosalie's welfare. "The daughter of my worst enemy," he mused; "and yet so good and lovely—she continually reminds me of what her mother was when I first knew her."

When the time came for Rosalie to bid them farewell and return, Conrad was again allowed to accompany her back to the convent. Darkness had set in when they reached the river bank. The air from over the distant hills stole whispering through the trees. It was a mysterious and solemn hour to the two young beings whom fate had thus brought together. For some time neither spoke; but as they neared the convent, Rosalie looked up, saying, in a subdued voice,

—"A week before the end of my year's instruction, I shall have to decide whether I shall rejoin the world or remain within the convent walls forever." Conrad again faithfully promised to call for her before that time "come what might."

"God only knows," the girl replied, "whether thou wilt be able to come for me or not. If thou dost come, I will go with thee wherever thou wilt. If not, I will remain at the convent and take the veil." She ceased and the firm pressure of her lip told Conrad that she would keep the resolve which her young heart had prompted her to make.

They had reached the garden gate, through which part of the convent buildings were visible. Rosalie pulled the bell, faced her companion suddenly, and throwing her arms around his neck, kissed him farewell. Conrad pressed the trembling girl to his heart. Not another word was spoken. A nun appeared at the gate. Rosalie entered and was lost to view.

Conrad turned back to the Monastery, meditating deeply. Strange indeed was that fate which had thrown in his path the daughter of the man he had sworn to destroy, appealing to him for protection, giving him her young heart unrestrainedly and awakening feelings in his own, which he knew, whatever their nature, would be lasting.

Duke Henry, seeing Conrad approach, met him and

they proceeded without delay to the ruins of Grunau. The Abbot followed, to make sure that nothing had been neglected for their comfort before he bade them "good-night."

A small oil-lamp, by whose dim light the banquet hall looked ghostly enough, enabled them without jostling each other to undress and creep into bed; a few moments later they were both asleep.

What was Rosalie doing at that time? The sweet child was kneeling at the bedside in her little chamber, praying to the Holy Virgin that God might keep Conrad from all harm, and in His own good time bring him back to her.

CHAPTER VII.

BARON VON GRUNAU'S GHOST.

"A horrid spectre rises to my sight;
Close by my side, and plain, and palpable,
In all good seeming and close circumstance,
As man meets man."

—*Baillis' Ethewald.*

Our two friends had slept many hours without even changing their positions, when Conrad, half conscious of someone walking about the room, awoke, just as the Monastery bell struck the hour of midnight. At the same time a peculiar smell pervaded his nostrils.

He sat up in bed, opening his eyes wide. By a strong light diffused through a vaporous atmosphere, every object in the room seemed to become clearly visible. As he looked up he was somewhat astonished to perceive that the eyes of the picture of the Knight in armor were shining and winking at him. He was further startled to see the two mail-clad wooden figures walking away from their central positions in front of the curtain, and stopping like sentinels at each side. Suddenly the curtain separated and, to Conrad's dis-

may, the ghost of the master of Grunau, the very counterpart of the picture overhead, with the exception of a greater rotundity of figure, stood before him. It was assuredly a genuine spectre, for through it the tapestry behind was clearly visible.

It opened its ugly mouth, raised its hand as in the picture, and in a hollow voice spoke these words: "Conrad von Rheinstein, beware! I have thee in my power. I can send thee and thy snoring friend at thy side to the unhappy land of shadows in the twinkling of an eye—even of those eyes in my abominable portrait yonder."

Conrad, fully believing the apparition to be supernatural, felt his heart throb violently; but as he listened to what could not fail to strike him as ludicrous talk from a being of another world his courage gradually returned, although the eyes of that picture of the Baron von Grunau were certainly twinkling and winking at him. "I will spare thee and thy friend," resumed the ghost, in its sepulchral voice, "and even will serve thee, if thou wilt promise to do what I require of thee."

"Who art thou?" inquired the young Knight, gaining courage at the sound of his own voice; "and what dost thou want of me, thou old fossil of a ghost?"

"I am the Baron von Grunau, or rather, his ghost," answered the spectre, hemming and coughing, as

though provoked at our hero's undaunted manner, which to Conrad again seemed unghostlike. "I was killed," continued the apparition, "together with my wife and all my attendants, by that Robber-Knight Hans von Waldhorst, who wantonly attacked and destroyed my castle. He abducted my two-year-old daughter and retains her in his den of iniquity to this day. I want revenge. Fate has so willed it that I can ask it of thee, Conrad von Rheinstein. That bold man must be made to suffer! he must die! aye, die by thy hand, thou unhappy mortal! so that my shade may rest in peace, instead of walking about these deserted ruins, stumbling over old furniture and knocking its shins against the dilapidated battlements. I want peace for the rest of my ghostly existence. I am but a shadow of my former self—a shadow worn to a thinner shade; but I was not always so miserable a specimen. Look at that picture of the handsome young knight on thy right! It is I, as I was thirty years ago." Conrad looked up and saw a portrait which had not been there before, better painted than the other, but whose eyes also were most certainly winking at him.

"I see," said he, in a bantering tone; "but I do not think this picture resembles thee as does thy other portrait, save perhaps about the eyes, which continue to keep up their everlasting winking."

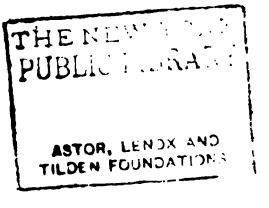
The ghost, evidently out of temper with our knight, coughed much louder than before; and in a voice deeper and gruffer, said, "I was young and slender then, nor did I change greatly in comparison until I was murdered. Since that time, ghost though I am, I have grown old, fat, flabby and ugly very fast, but unless my death is avenged I shall soon become as thou wert pleased to call me, an old fossil, indeed, and an eyesore to all respectable ghosts. As soon, however, as thou takest an oath to avenge my death, I shall disappear with that other hideous effigy yonder, which is my portrait as a ghost, painted by a miserable ghost of an artist. Then both the artist and I shall be at peace. But shouldst thou fail to take or to keep the oath, and if at the end of a year Count Hans should yet live, then shall my spirit continue to haunt thee, and I shall reappear upon this very scene, together with a far more dreadful portrait of myself; and that same pitiable shadow of the miserable Monk of an artist, after painting this abomination also, will again commit suicide, even in despair as he did at having produced that first one. Know thou, Conrad von Rheinstein, that when a ghost commits suicide it is the most terrible thing that can happen in the world of shadows —one from which no end of complications may arise, all which will react on thee if thou failest me!"

"I believe thee, old fossil." Conrad, strongly in-



"I swear," replied our hero, involuntarily.




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clined to laugh outright, now interposed boldly: "A ghost of a ghost of a miserable artist must indeed be a bad specimen."

"Very well, then," roared the corpulent, though transparent shade of von Grunau, "if thou believest it swear to avenge my cruel fate! Swear that before another year shall have made itself felt in my fleshless bones, thou wilt kill him; swear!"

And "Swear!" "Swear!" was repeated by the two wooden sentinels as well as the portrait on the wall. Conrad noticed that they still glared and winked at him.

"Swear, Conrad von Rheinstein," repeated the ghost once more, and in so hollow a voice that it seemed to come from its transparent boots of mail, and "Swear!" "Swear!" was repeated from all sides by ghostly voices.

"I swear," replied our hero, involuntarily, in a loud voice, raising his right hand in imitation of the spectre.

Ere he had realized what he had done, the ghostly image of the Baron von Grunau had vanished, the curtain had closed and the suits of mail were walking back to their places, and Conrad, looking up, saw that the Baron's portrait in armor had disappeared; while that of the young knight, which had only recently made its appearance as though by magic, remained, according to the spectre's promise. The light faded away

gradually. All at once a most diabolical laughter from all around fell upon his ear, which made him shudder. Presently he fancied he heard retreating footsteps. As they died away, the laughter also ceased. Finally all was still, not a sound, save the slight snoring of his lordship, the Duke, who had slept soundly throughout this ghostly visitation.

Conrad's shudders ceased. He lay back on his pillow, wondering whether or not all had been a dream. The peculiar vapor, which still pervaded the room, assured him, however, that something actual had occurred, but what it all portended he knew not. Of one thing only he was certain; he had taken a solemn oath that within a year Hans von Waldhorst should die by his hand—Count Hans, whose daughter had but lately saved him from danger, and given him her innocent heart.

"What will be the end of all this?" he again asked himself. Pondering over this question, he fell asleep, and did not awake until a late hour of the morning.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE FALCON'S ROCK.

"There is a wakening on the mighty hills,
A kindling with the spirit of the morn!"

—*Mrs. Hemans.*

The Falcon's Rock, so-called, most appropriately, by Duke Henry's warlike and aggressive ancestors, was an extensive, imposing and strongly fortified structure, situated on a broad, rocky promontory which rose precipitously amidst a fertile, far extending valley.

The castle and fortress of Falkenstein formed one of the greatest strongholds in Germany, at the time. The approach, through a lower well-fortified gate, led up the steep ascent across a chasm to the drawbridge, which on the summit of the rock, spanning the same cleft, constituted the only access to the main battlements and buildings. These were of vast extent, affording ample accommodations for the Duke's numerous followers, retainers and guests. Fronting the approach, outside of its main buildings and extending

their entire length, was the arena for tournaments, outdoor festivities, and for exercising the horses. This broad, well-fortified plateau afforded an excellent view of the landscape. Through the fascinating scene a narrow river wound its way midst rich pastures and thriving villages, all belonging to the Principality of Falkenstein, a favored land in the midst of which the Goddess of Plenty sat enthroned.

Ursula, the Princess of Falkenstein, the Duke's only daughter, was more highly cultivated than usual in those days, even for a person of her rank. She lent a luster to all that region by her beauty and brilliant attainments, while her goodness made itself felt to the remotest part of the domain. Not only were her face and figure of exceeding beauty, and her heart brave and unflinching in time of danger; she was also the embodiment of tenderness and sympathy, charity found in her a perfect exponent of its divine nature. To see her was to adore; to know her was to love. Though much above the average height, the matchless symmetry of her supple figure rendered it hardly perceptible, save when closely comparing her with others of her sex. The grace and poetry of her motion struck the eye of the beholder, not only while noting her daring feats of horsemanship, but at all times. Her luxuriant auburn hair, which she wore partly coiled at the back of her head, allowing its ends to hang down be-

low the waist, was deeply tinged with gold. Her wonderful face, almost regular in repose, was fascinatingly irregular when animated; and in suppressing a smile, she drew down the point of her slightly tip-tilted nose with her short upper lip, giving that interesting feature, for the moment, the appearance of being arched. Of her beautiful dark grey eyes, it is enough to say that they reflected the pure soul within.

Her mother had been bred at the Court of the Empress. Though an invalid ever after the birth of her only child, she had done much at Falkenstein Castle to instill into those dwelling there the same refinement of manner to which she had been accustomed, and to cultivate the taste of her daughter, who was an apt scholar, always amenable to her mother's slightest wishes.

Being possessed of considerable administrative ability, Ursula had taken personal command of the fortress during her father's protracted absence, and had sent out various expeditions in search of him. As each returned without any tidings of the Duke, her anxiety became very great. When her last search proved unsuccessful, she announced to the already numerous guests that the festivities would have to be postponed. The many knights and dames who had assembled to participate in these were reluctantly preparing to depart, when the lay brother who had been despatched

by the Abbot, arrived with the tidings of the Duke's safety. At once a new life and bustle awakened in the castle. Radiant with happiness, Ursula became the inspiring hostess once more, and the guests returned to their enjoyments and luxurious comforts. Without delay, Ursula despatched a detachment of trusty lances to the Monastery to escort her father back to Falkenstein.

On the morning after the eventful night spent in the banquet hall of the ruins of Grunau, the Duke was the first to awake, feeling much refreshed. Looking out of the window he perceived a small cavalcade approaching, which he recognized to his great joy as his own followers. He at once woke his young friend to impart the good news.

Conrad rubbed his eyes and instinctively looked for the portrait overhead. It was gone; but on the opposite panel, where nothing had been visible the day before, was the newly painted picture of a young knight.

He felt sure that what he had seen in the night was not a dream, but a vision which he could not explain, though he said nothing of it to the Duke, and forgot all about it during the excitement of the days following.

The armed attendants were at the gate. They brought horses and suits of mail for the Duke and



Bending slightly forward in a listening attitude.



Conrad, as well as suitable raiment and a horse for Rosalie.

Princess Ursula, in her wild delight at the happy state of affairs, sent word that everything would be ready for the tournaments on the appointed day, and that she would expect her father with his two guests that very night.

In half an hour the Duke and Conrad dressed, breakfasted and were in the saddle, the Abbot being present to see them depart. To him the Duke entrusted the garments to be left at the convent for Rosalie's future use.

On the evening of the day on which Duke Henry and Conrad set forth from the Benedictine Monastery, Ursula rode forth from Falkenstein to meet them. On her arrival, at nightfall, at an adjacent village, she halted. Bending slightly forward in a listening attitude, she sat on her steed, her noble face and figure being outlined against the dark background by the flickering light from a neighboring inn. Thus she waited, eagerly intent on catching the first sound of approaching horses' feet. A group of peasants drew near to learn the cause of her presence at that hour. Reports of their beloved master's safety had already reached them. One, a stalwart fellow, drew near the fair rider, cap in hand. Making a low obei-

sance, he enquired if her Highness had received any additional information concerning her father.

"I am here to meet him this very night, my good man," answered the Princess; "he may arrive at any moment."

"Hurrah!" cried he to his comrades, "the Duke is coming!" Lusty cheers for their master and his daughter went up from the bystanders. There were few among them who had not received some kindness at Ursula's hands; and the Duke himself was personally known and loved by most of his dependents. The news of his expected arrival spread like wild-fire throughout the little hamlet. Lights appeared in the windows, and notwithstanding the lateness of the hour, men, women and children arrayed themselves in holiday attire, standing in their doorways ready to welcome back their beloved ruler.

The sound of hoofs upon the village pavement became audible; first faintly, then more distinctly. The lungs of young and old were taxed to the utmost. The Duke checked his horse in the midst of his subjects, with Conrad at his heels, an interested spectator of the scene. Some of the villagers pressed forward and grasped the Duke's hand to kiss it. One woman, a tall, buxom young mother, held her babe aloft that it might see its benefactor's face. He caught sight of her, and reaching out his hand for the babe, kissed it and

returned it to its proud mother. The shout that went up from the delighted people after this spontaneous act was deafening.

With her heart beating tumultuously, Ursula rode forward to meet her father, the peasantry making way for her. The Duke dismounted. She did likewise, assisted by Conrad, who had suddenly appeared at her side. A moment later father and daughter were in each others' arms.

Conrad remained standing near. He had held the Princess' hand. He had seen her face for a moment, as she sprang lightly from the saddle, though in so faint a light that he could form but little idea of her beauty; but the rich accents of the voice in which she thanked him had sent a thrill to his heart. Ursula, in accepting his proffered assistance in dismounting, had conferred upon the young stranger what, in those days of knighthood, was considered a great honor; and when she permitted him to assist her to remount, he felt elated at the distinction and sprang to the back of his own horse in a proud and happy mood.

The Duke and Ursula continued their way, in advance of the rest, up the steep ascent to the castle, discoursing of the late adventures. Her heart went out with gratitude and sympathy to Conrad. When she drew rein in the courtyard of Falkenstein, finding him again at her side eager to assist her in alighting, she

thanked him in a voice full of emotion for all he had done for her father. He had not as yet seen her features distinctly. When they entered the brightly illuminated hall, however, the young knight was dazzled by the irresistible charm of her beauty, which now, for the first time, beamed upon him.

The Duchess received him with grateful tears in her eyes. Her fair face, and the gentleness and refinement of her manners, greatly impressed him; and he bowed on his knee before her, and raised her thin, white hand to his lips.

A goodly company of gallant knights, minstrels, squires and their dames, gathered around the festive board in the superb banquet hall. They regarded the newcomer, Conrad von Rheinstein, with mingled feelings of curiosity, admiration and envy. Among them, a gigantic knight, of forbidding countenance and awkward bearing—no other, as Conrad learned afterward, than the stupid but powerful Prince Steffel, Landgraf of Pomerania, sat with frowning brow, which impressed Conrad most unfavorably. This huge Pomeranian boor had been victorious in the last two tournaments held in honor of the eighteenth and nineteenth birthdays of the Princess. On each occasion he had asked Ursula for her hand, and had been repulsed. He had come to fight for her for the third time, and if again victorious, by the rules of knight-

hood, he would acquire the right to demand of the Duke the much coveted prize. In such an event, a refusal by Duke Henry would undoubtedly precipitate hostilities between him and the powerful Pomeranian.

Ursula knew all this, and her heart misgave her as she thought of the beautiful and prosperous Principality of Falkenstein being devastated by war, and the unequal chances of her father in a struggle with that formidable adversary.

Since seeing Conrad, the very flower of ideal knighthood, a faint hope had arisen in her heart that possibly he might prove her deliverer from the threatened calamity by vanquishing this hitherto victorious but most unwelcome aspirant to her favor.

Conrad was seated at one end of the table, on the left of the Duchess, and next to the Princess. On the other side of the noble invalid, directly opposite to Conrad and Ursula, sat Prince Steffel, alone in his sullenness, but on account of his great size taking up room for two. Bernard von Wolfram, the Minstrel, had his seat on the other side of the Princess, the Queen of his songs, and inspiration of all his deeds of valor. Being a Knight of the Holy Cross, he had met Conrad in the Holy Land, and had returned but a short time before him. They now greeted one another as old friends.

Ursula had known Wolfram from early childhood,

and always looked upon him as her faithful admirer and good knight, and since his late return, as her possible champion against the great Pomeranian Prince.

Wolfram, however, was no longer young. Moreover, he had been wounded twice while fighting against the Turks, and although as valiant as ever, was physically no match for her dreaded suitor. Conrad, on the other hand, was young, supple and stalwart, with an open and a fearless eye. He inspired Ursula with a strange hope. As she conversed with him this feeling, which had taken deep hold of her heart, found expression in her eyes. He understood their meaning.

There were other Crusaders present. Naturally, the conversation turned for a time on their adventures in the Holy Land. But the Duke found it necessary to give a full account of his and Conrad's imprisonment and their escape, in which narration Rosalie's name was often mentioned. To this name Ursula listened with lively interest and strange emotions.

Bernard von Wolfram, the Minstrel, was called on for a song. Accompanying himself on the harp, he sang a warlike ballad, introducing his inspiring lady-love with tender effect. Ursula smiled her approval on her faithful knight, while the assembled guests applauded him vigorously. Toasts to the health of the Duke and Duchess, the Princess Ursula, Conrad von Rheinstein, and Bernard, the Minstrel, were drunk

in due succession. Prince Steffel's name, which was not popular, was purposely omitted. The uncouth giant drank his wine in silence, meanwhile nursing his wrath and thirsting for the revenge he meant to take in the lists.

The banquet ended, a dance in the adjoining hall was next in order. Conrad, under the intoxicating spell of the Princess' beauty, guided her vaguely through the figures then in vogue. The Duchess could not remove her eyes from the handsome couple. Hopes, born of motherly solicitude, sprang up in her heart that Ursula would find a welcome suitor in this gallant young knight, who, she felt sure, must already have lost his heart to her beautiful daughter. Prince Steffel's face was green with jealousy; and when he approached Ursula to ask for a later dance, and found that engaged by Bernard von Wolfram and the one still later by Conrad, he became furious, and left the room in a fit of sullen anger.

Conrad retired to rest, with heart and mind in a whirl of excitement. He lay awake the greater part of the night. When at last nature claimed her due and he slept, both the Princess and Rosalie appeared to him in his dreams, standing with arms outstretched toward him. As he stood undecided toward whom to turn, Rosalie motioned him to Ursula. He advanced toward her, but even as he felt the arms of the beautiful

Princess around his neck, and pressed her to his heart, her identity underwent a change; the face and the form were those of Rosalie.

On awakening he was much perplexed by his dream; but he soon forgot it among the eventful realities of the scenes which followed.

CHAPTER IX.

THE TOURNAMENT.

"The shout
Of battle now began, and rushing sound
Of onset ended soon each milder thought."

—*Milton.*

The day following the Duke's return was a busy one at Falkenstein. Conrad saw little of Ursula, but that little was enough to increase his admiration and inspire him with the utmost zeal in preparing for the events of the morrow.

Owing to the threatened postponement of the festivities, the arranging of the elaborate accessories necessary to their success was much hurried. For the last twenty-four hours the energies of the Princess and her attendants had been taxed to the utmost. In the short time which had intervened, however, so much had been accomplished that Ursula decided to give her final orders, while resting in a small room in the tower of the palace which overlooked the arena.

Conrad, at first regretting the absence of his good horse, Saladin, had reason to be content with the fine stallion presented to him by the Duke, a spirited animal, much heavier than his own Arabian steed, and therefore better suited to be pitted against the overgrown bulk of his Pomeranian rival.

During the morning and afternoon of that day Conrad, clad in full armor, put his noble animal through various maneuvers on the broad plateau, while the preparations for the tournament were in progress.

He was little aware that besides those of the interested workmen, there were two beautiful eyes, concealed behind curtained windows of the tower, which sought him out, watching his every movement; and that the heart of their owner beat high with enthusiasm as she observed the masterly horsemanship of her newly chosen knight, who sat in his saddle as though horse and rider were one.

As a contest in marksmanship was to form a part of the expected entertainment, Conrad found time to practice shooting with a cross-bow. To his great disgust his bolts fell wide of the mark, which hardly should have surprised him, as he had not handled a bow since his boyhood.

In the center of the lists a temporary throne for the Princess and her august parents was in process of erection, with adjoining seats on either side for the

nobility, as well as platforms for a large concourse of people, extending the entire length along the rear of the outbuildings. Wooden fences, shaped like crescents, had been placed at each end of the grounds, around which ran the course for both horse and foot races. Fastened against one of these was a target for the cross-bow contest. The rest of the space had been left clear for the tilt between armed knights on their mailed chargers, the all-important event of the coming day.

Although our hero had gained considerable mastery over his steed while exercising it, he nevertheless looked forward with some doubt and even trepidation to meeting his powerful rival, the Pomeranian Prince.

A glorious morning, promising a beautiful day for the great festival, dawned over the Principality of Falkenstein. The sparkling sunlight, tempered by fleecy clouds and cooling breezes, greeted the large assembly of people as they entered the grounds and ranged themselves in expectation of the arrival of the Queen of the Tourney, their beloved Princess.

A great shout of welcome rent the air as Ursula, attired in white and gold, ascended the throne, followed by the Duke and Duchess, the latter borne on a chair.

Seated under a canopy of blue, the Princess shed the radiance of her beauty on all. In her anxiety as to the result of the approaching contest, her heart

fluttered unwontedly; and, as she scanned with eager eyes the knights entering the field at the central gate, her countenance betrayed conflicting emotions by the color which came and went.

Conrad, Bernard von Wolfram, Prince Steffel, and nine other mounted knights in full armor, rode slowly forward in line to the throne and dipped their lances to the Princess. She arose, bowing gracefully in acknowledgment of the salute; then motioning Conrad to approach, she fastened a white and gold scarf around his arm, saying in an undertone, "I have faith in thee, Sir Knight. May God and Our Lady protect thee!"

Prince Steffel, seeing the movement of her lips, gnashed his teeth, muttering a savage oath under his closed visor. Conrad fell again into line, elated, but striving to collect his thoughts, well knowing that on his coolness and skill, rather than on his strength, depended the fortunes of the day.

At a signal from the Duke, the Herald announced in a loud voice the order of the combats. A bugle sounded. All eyes became riveted upon the stalwart knights, drawn up in opposing ranks. A second bugle-note rang out the signal for battle. With lances firmly couched, they rushed like a whirlwind to the charge. The crash came in the center of the lists in front of the throne. Stout lances were broken and splintered like

reeds. Some of the knights were unhorsed. The more fortunate galloped on, apparently unhurt by the shock, and returned to finish the combat with the sword.

Ursula saw Prince Steffel, who towered above all others, unhorse several of the opposing knights, without apparent effort; but Conrad, her champion, to her great delight, had acquitted himself well. His wonderful horsemanship and gallant bearing called forth ringing plaudits from the admiring multitude. Bernard von Wolfram unhorsed one antagonist, and with his sword worsted another, but was well nigh conquered by a third, a most powerful knight, upon whom he inflicted as great punishment as he received. Being too much injured to continue the contest, both were led from the field. The Minstrel soon returned, to the delight of Ursula. Though pale and halting, he was able to fill a seat among the spectators, near the Queen of his soul and his song.

By this time only two were left in the lists unhurt, Prince Steffel and Conrad von Rheinstein, and they were to face each other in what many feared would be mortal combat.

Ursula's heart beat tumultuously, as, after a short pause, she saw them confront each other. Inwardly she murmured a prayer for the safety of her gallant knight.

Prince Steffel noticed her anxious look, and knowing well that it was not on his account, determined to kill his rival. When they met in front of the throne, Ursula saw the giant form of the Pomeranian, mounted on an immense charger, bear down resistlessly, as it seemed, on Conrad. Her heart stood still—for one moment only, however. In the next it leaped for joy; for after a fearful crash, in which her hero's lance was shivered and his horse thrown backward on his haunches, both combatants galloped away unhurt.

The younger knight, guiding his horse close to his adversary, had dexterously evaded the point aimed at his head, by an outward turn of his body, and had broken his own lance into splinters against the shield of the Pomeranian giant. Though somewhat shaken, he felt that there was to be no breathing spell; for already Prince Steffel, according to rule, had thrown away his lance, and muttering bitter oaths between his teeth for having missed his aim, had returned to the charge, sword in hand.

In his eagerness to reach his foe, the Prince galloped past the throne, from which Ursula watched him with loathing and breathless suspense. Conrad, on the other hand, stood motionless, not far away, awaiting his enemy's attack. As the Prince, with lifted sword, was on the point of delivering his blow, Conrad, driving the spur into his horse's flank, made him



Reining in his charger a few strides beyond, he saw the Prince sway in his saddle.



leap sidewise out of the giant's reach. Then wheeling him quickly around he reached, from behind, his surprised antagonist's left side.

Before the Prince could face him, the forefeet of Conrad's horse grazed the neck of the Pomeranian's steed; while with a mighty and well-directed stroke in passing, his sword cleft the steel cap, and inflicted a deep gash on the Prince's head. Reining in his charger a few strides beyond, he saw the Prince sway in his saddle, and knew at once that he held his gigantic rival's life at his mercy. His generous nature, however, restrained Conrad from dealing a fatal blow. Facing him again, he received the weak stroke of the wounded, half-blinded Pomeranian, on his shield, and in turn, catching him with the point of his sword near the right shoulder, thrust him off his rearing steed into the dust.

Ursula, having watched the combat to its issue with intense excitement and anxiety, gave a great gasp of relief; her heart was almost bursting with thankfulness; her eyes, dim with happy tears, followed her brave knight, as he galloped past, victorious.

Amid the blare of trumpets and loud plaudits to the victor from the assembled multitude, Prince Steffel, stunned by his fall, arose with the assistance of his attendant squires. When they had removed his helmet, the blood meanwhile streaming down his face,

he glared about in utter bewilderment for a space; then gathering himself together with an effort, a deep scowl darkening his ugly visage, he shook his clenched fist, first at Conrad, then at the occupants of the throne, and suffered himself to be led from the lists. Soon after, with deep-seated vengeance in his heart, he left the castle, followed by his many retainers, much to the relief of the Princess and her guests.

Conrad dismounted. Ascending the steps leading to the throne, he knelt before Ursula, modestly awaiting his reward. The beautiful woman smiled on her victorious champion as only she could smile. Taking from her fair neck a golden chain from which was suspended a jeweled dagger, she hung it around the neck of her deliverer, saying, "Wear this for my sake, brave Conrad von Rheinstein; thou hast earned my everlasting gratitude!"

The young knight looked into her beautiful eyes until he was entranced. Nevertheless he managed to take her soft white hand and bring it to his lips, and seemed disposed to hold it there longer than was necessary. As she gently withdrew it, he found voice to say:

"Noble Princess, to have earned thy friendship is a first step toward heaven on earth! What mortal would not risk his life for such a boon?"

Conrad felt abashed at having said so much; but

[redacted]



But he heeded them not; his eyes were only for Rosalie.

when he noted in his lady's face a readiness to forgive the extravagant tribute, he became reassured. Joyful beyond measure in her timely deliverance from a detested suitor, she bade him rise and keep the scarf around his arm in memory of that day.

The Duke and Duchess, whose delight well-nigh equaled that of their daughter, warmly congratulated the hero of the day on his victory. If, in this, the happiest and proudest moment of his life, the young Knight-Errant entirely forgot, for the time being, the young girl who had saved his life, one must forgive him.

Those of the knights who were not actually disabled had remounted, and rode forth from the scene of their conflict through the courtyard gate. Leaving their horses with attendants, they doffed their armor, and returned to the arena for the final contest with crossbows, clad, like Conrad, in festive hunting costume.

Ursula poured for each a goblet of wine. Conrad she invited to a place at her feet, while Bernard von Wolfram found his place on the steps lower down, yet within speaking distance of his divinity.

The bugle sounded for the next contest, a horse-race, without saddles, in which the peasantry participated. Lads over fifteen years of age being admitted, several young squires took part in this, the most amusing feature of the day's entertainment.

Horses under a certain height were excluded; nevertheless the differences in their sizes, and the contrast between the stupid faces of the peasants and those of the gay and shrewd retainers of the knights, proved a most laughable spectacle. The course, which encircled the entire arena, had its starting and finishing post directly in front of the silken canopy beneath which sat the Princess. Over a score took part in the race. Among them Ursula and Conrad noticed two young riders who remained close together amid all the confusion attending the start. One of them, a handsome, dark-eyed lad, was mounted on a spirited, well-bred horse, which he sat firmly and gracefully. The other, a pale-faced boy of the peasantry, on a tall, long-limbed, thin animal, was himself so tall and thin that he looked as if he might break in two at the least provocation. Though awkward in appearance, he, also, sat his horse well.

"The face of that dark-eyed boy," said Ursula, "seems familiar to me, yet I cannot at the moment recall where I have seen him."

"He is an excellent rider," Conrad rejoined, looking up admiringly at her flushed and interested face. "That tall, thin youth, with his long-legged steed, will scarce be as close to his friend at the end of the race as he is at present."

The signal for the start was now given. It was as

much as the majority of the riders could do to keep on their horses at all. Before they had fairly started many were rolling in the dust, their horses galloping off riderless. The other animals, excited by the loud uproar of the spectators, kicked and plunged until the flag fell, when those whose riders had managed to keep their seats, actually got away.

"They are a motley crew," cried Bernard von Wolfram, his sore sides shaking with laughter. "I will lay a wager that the dark lad just noticed by thee, noble Princess, will win the race."

"I quite agree with thee, my faithful minstrel, and therefore we cannot wager," replied the Princess, "but who is he?"

"He is in my service," answered Wolfram. "I will tell thee more of him anon."

All eyes were now on the riders as they rounded the first barrier, where two more unfortunates were thrown at the turn. As they re-entered the open track, the two youths, who had kept back at the start, were seen in the front rank close alongside each other. From that moment they forged steadily ahead, and before rounding the second turn had outrun all competitors. On the home stretch, as they still ran neck and neck toward the winning post, an excited murmur ran through the throng. Every eye was strained upon

them. As they drew nearer, Ursula and Conrad arose, involuntarily. To their great surprise they noticed that the dark-eyed rider was lying back and holding in his horse with all his might, while the tall, pale-faced youth, bending forward, plied his whip vigorously on his foaming steed. The flag fell. The pale rider had won by a neck. A neck only, it is true; but by it he had secured the first prize, a considerable sum of money. Livid as death, he was helped from his horse and hurried to a shady spot. There he lay for some time, gasping for breath, while one of Ursula's attendants brought to him the bag of coin which he had won. His dark-eyed companion, on the other hand, dismounting as nimbly as possible, knelt at the feet of the Princess and received at the hands of a servitor the second prize, a beautiful saddle and bridle, which were destined to be used by him many times in the service of the noble givér. The boy bore himself throughout in a graceful and manly fashion. Ursula inquired of the minstrel if he, too, had noticed him pulling in his horse toward the end of the race.

"Indeed I did," replied Wolfram, "and I do not understand it. I shall question him about it by and by. Kurt is a brave lad, and but sixteen years old. I was fortunate enough to meet with him on my way home from the Holy Land."

"Oh, I remember now," said the Princess. "How well he rides!"

"He does, indeed, noble lady," replied the Knight, "and he rode an excellent horse. Surely, had he wished it, he might have won the race."

A foot-race was next in order, in which many of the bareback riders participated. The boy Kurt, with his somewhat short legs, tried pluckily and honestly, this time, to outrun his competitors to the end. The victor of the horse-race lay in the shade meanwhile, unable to take part in the contest as he had hoped to do, and thereby win another money prize. It was captured, instead, by a strong young fellow, who was one of the Duke's retainers. Kurt, having again come in second, his face all aglow with exertion, knelt once more before Ursula, and received a half-sword, a kind of large dagger of the finest steel, which he buckled to his waist as he strode proudly back to join his fellow dependents.

Then followed the last, and next to the combat between the armed knights, the most important contest of the tournament. It consisted of a trial of marksmanship with the cross-bow, for which the list of competitors was made up of visiting knights and foresters. Though some of the former had acquired in the chase a good command of this weapon, they were scarce a match for their formidable opponents, fresh from their

daily practice in forest and field. Conrad, lingering near Ursula, was the last to enter the lists, feeling doubtful, after his unsatisfactory trial of the day previous, of his ability to even hit the target at all. His belief in a lucky star, that day, urged him on.

Again the bugle sounded. The competitors formed in line in front of the throne, with the young Knight of Rheinstein at the extreme end. The shooting began. Many admirable shots were made, the foresters having the best of it, until the last marksman sent his bolt. This was Conrad, who luckily, and entirely by accident, hit the very center of the bull's-eye, in close proximity to three others. How he managed to make this fortunate shot, he never could imagine. It sufficed, however, to make him the victor in this contest also. Verily, his star was in the ascendant.

Once more a shout went up for the young knight-errant. Ursula, with a look in which admiration and affection were visibly blended, motioned him to approach and receive from her the last prize of the day.

Just at this moment, a sudden and unexpected bugle blast heralded a newcomer. A young horseman clad in russet and green galloped into the arena, followed by a dozen mounted attendants. He halted before the blue canopy, knelt at the feet of Ursula, and craved permission, at this late hour, to enter the list of the marksmen.

The Princess saw before her a noble youth of graceful bearing, dark complexion and wonderfully deep black eyes, who regarded her with undisguised admiration. She blushed deeply in spite of herself. With a slight inclination of the head she referred him to her father. The Duke, calling the newcomer "Hugo," told him that he was free to take part in the contest; but that he failed to see how he could possibly outdo Knight Conrad, whose bolt still remained fastened in the center of the target.

"With your leave, noble Duke," answered Hugo, "I would fain examine its exact position and try to put mine in its place."

Though this was said modestly enough, the words seemed to convey a foolish boast to the minds of his astonished listeners. The Duke, however, made no further objection. The young forester went to the target, finding by measurement that Conrad's bolt was a trifle below the actual center. On returning he took a finely wrought crossbow from the hands of one of his attendants. Advancing to the line in front of the throne, to the further astonishment of the spectators, he deliberately stepped twenty paces backward, in order to make a long-distance shot. As he stood there, his dark-green, tight-fitting suit setting off to perfection his graceful figure, his handsome face aglow with excitement as his eye scanned the stock of his cross-

bow, he made a picture which deeply impressed Ursula. With lips slightly parted and for the time oblivious to everything around her, she watched him intently.

With a well-calculated upward curve, his sharp-pointed bolt whizzed through the air. In descending it struck the bull's-eye directly upon the point of Conrad's shaft, driving the latter downward deeper into the wood, and lodging immediately above it.

The wildest enthusiasm followed this extraordinary shot, the foresters in particular being greatly elated, some of them essaying to carry their young champion on their shoulders. This distinction he modestly declined. Walking to the blue canopy, crossbow in hand, he again knelt at the feet of the Princess.

Their eyes met. Ursula became confused, so ardent was the gaze of Hugo von Waldhorst. In a low voice she bade him rise, and placed in his hand a carved ivory image of herself, attached to a delicate golden chain, which, but a few moments before, she had taken from her bosom as a prize to be hung around Conrad's neck.

The youth pressed his lips to her hand, which only increased Ursula's confusion, while he said softly, "I shall wear this image on my heart to my dying day, in memory of thy gracious kindness to the son of one

who has forfeited all claims to honorable knighthood by betraying thy father's friendship." He arose and turned toward his attendants.

Conrad had been a silent spectator of Ursula's emotion, and wondered who this last comer might be.

The Duke descended into the lists, now astir with the departing multitude. He spoke to the young huntsman within Conrad's hearing, inviting him to remain and participate in the banquet and further festivities.

Hugo declared himself unable to do so, saying, "It was to discover what had become of Rosalie that I journeyed hither. At the Monastery I learned that she was safe at the Convent of St. Agnes. Having come so far, I could not resist a desire to reach Falkenstein in time for this trial with my crossbow."

"Thou didst right, Hugo," replied the Duke, "and wilt always be welcome at my hearth, even though thy father has betrayed me, his oldest and best friend. Should he continue in his mad career, I will not suffer Rosalie to return to his roof, but will adopt her myself when she leaves the convent."

"Indeed, it has come to this; we are dependent on thee, gracious Duke, our kind and noble friend," said Hugo; "but I must needs bid thee farewell, and I crave forgiveness for having today, in a moment of weakness, recalled the dishonored name of Waldhorst to this noble gathering."

"Thou hast, rather, redeemed that name," replied the Duke, "and I regret to have thee depart so speedily. Do not fail to acquaint me as to how matters go between thee and thy father. God speed thee!"

He was gone, the handsome young forester, who had played so unexpected, and unknowingly, an important part in the events of that memorable day.

"This is the second child of Hans von Waldhorst," soliloquized Conrad, "who has thus crossed my path in the most extraordinary manner. This youth, if I mistake not, has made a deep impression on the Princess, whom I fancied to be already favorably inclined toward me. In spite of it all I cannot help liking him; it must be because he reminded me of Rosalie."

It was thus that Hugo's sister was brought to the mind of Conrad at the end of all the engrossing excitement of the tournament and its victories.

It may well be mentioned, just here, that after a severe struggle between Hugo and his father, the Duke's horse and Conrad's, with the attendants of the former, were set free from Waldhorst, and arrived at the Castle of Falkenstein within one week after the great festal day.

When Saladin caught sight of his master, he neighed for joy; he kicked, and plunged, and pranced, and finally drew near and laid his head on his shoulder to be patted. Conrad stroked his neck and vaulted upon

his back. After gamboling about for some minutes to the entertainment of the bystanders, the happy young knight saw his faithful steed safely ensconced in the stall, and whispered in his ear of many canters that were in store for him in company with the beautiful Princess.

CHAPTER X.

THE BANQUET.

"The banquet waits our presence, festal joy
Laughs in the mantling goblet, and the night
Illumin'd by the taper's dazzling beam
Rivals departed day."

—*Barbarossa.*

On the evening of the day of the tournaments just described, there were seated around the richly laden board in the decorated banquet hall of the Castle of Falkenstein, a goodly company of knights and ladies, foresters and dames.

At one end of the table, under a canopy of roses, sat Ursula, flushed, excited, at times apparently somewhat absent-minded, but withal more beautiful than ever. Conrad occupied the seat of honor on her right. Bernard von Wolfram had his usual place upon her left, his aged frame still sore from the severe encounter in the lists, but not so much as to prevent his becoming brilliant and entertaining as the quickening wine

mounted to his brain. The conversation naturally turned upon the late tournament, and Conrad was accorded most of the glory.

When the skillful young huntsman, who had so suddenly appeared and disappeared, was mentioned, and inquiry made as to his name, the Duke informed his guests that he was the son of his former friend, but now his worst enemy, Hans von Waldhorst; adding that he hoped no one present would bear ill-will against the children of that miscreant. A murmur of surprise followed this appeal. Conrad noted in Ursula's face an expression of pain. Putting aside what little jealousy existed in his generous nature, and only anxious to turn the conversation from a subject which seemed to distress her, he stood up gallantly, announcing in a clear, ringing voice the first toast of the evening, "To the Queen of the Tournament; the Queen of our hearts; Ursula, the fairest, the noblest, the loveliest of her sex. God bless her!"

The guests applauded this sentiment vigorously, the Duke and Duchess smiling happily the while at the gallantry of their daughter's champion. Ursula inclined her head to our hero in acknowledgment, but ere she could speak the minstrel arose. Without accompaniment, he sang in thrilling cadences a verse descriptive of the influence of womanly beauty and goodness such as hers on benighted mankind.

As he sat down, Ursula turned to Conrad with a fascinating smile, saying: "I fear that the words of my devoted minstrel, as well as thine, my noble Knight, are unmerited. The sentiments they express are hardly applicable to me."

"My poor words," exclaimed Conrad, "and even those of that beautiful song, fail in doing justice to thy beauty, noble Princess, or to the goodness of thy heart, both of which radiate far-reaching joy and happiness."

"I thank thee, my noble Knight," answered Ursula; "and that thou thinkest well of me, thy brave deeds of this day, which I shall ever remember, have proven."

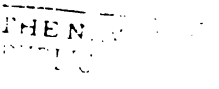
She extended her hand to him. For the second time that day he pressed it to his lips, yet she withdrew it more quickly that she had done at the tournament, before the appearance of the young forester. Bernard von Wolfram now arose, saying: "Let us drink to the hero of the day, Conrad von Rheinstein; hoping that every unworthy aspirant to the hand of our gracious Princess may be chastised by him, as was that overgrown Pomeranian Prince."

Conrad received a perfect ovation. Ursula touched goblets with him, and actually drained her own, the first and only wine she tasted. After this her face



She withdrew it more quickly than she had done at the tournament.




THEN

brightened, and she was herself again. The hostess then reminded Wolfram of the promised information concerning his young servant, Kurt.

"I met him in the strangest manner," replied the minstrel; "and should it please thee, noble Princess, and thy honored guests, I will tell the story." As all desired to hear the tale from so good and entertaining a romancer, he began:

"One evening, on my return from the Holy Land, after a long day's journey on horseback through Hungary, I reached the spacious residence of a well-to-do peasant, whom I asked for shelter. I was alone, my only servant having died soon after leaving Palestine. The owner and his buxom wife bade me welcome. In a very short time we sat down to a fine repast. This was unexpected to me; though I did justice to both food and wine, as did mine host and comely hostess. The Hungarian wine caused me to lose my head; certainly to unloose my tongue. I told them of innumerable deeds of valor in the Holy Land, some of which were entirely creations of my imagination, and which I have since wholly forgotten. I also sang warlike songs and played the fool in everything, though my smiling hostess most graciously applauded to the last. All the while I noticed a ragged boy sitting by the fire, giving it his constant attention that he might keep it alive that cold night. He stared at me

with his big black eyes and listened eagerly to my wonderful tales and ballads. This lad had attended to my horse on my arrival, likewise performed several menial offices about the house, which facts had not escaped my notice. I felt grieved for him. Not until the advancing hours of the morning did mine host and hostess retire. As the boy was still awake, I concluded that in all probability his resting place would be before the embers of the dying fire. When I had reached my bedroom, I heard the woman, whose chamber was next to mine, repeatedly call the poor fellow, Kurt. Very soon after, becoming aware of a commotion in the hall, and opening my door, I beheld the old man in the act of pulling him by the hair, while his wife was vigorously laying a stick across his back. After this they jointly kicked him down the stairs. At the moment I was very drowsy and felt too cold to interfere with their proceedings, so got to bed as quickly as possible. I must have slept heavily for some hours, when, about daylight, I was aroused by a tremendous clatter in my apartment. Sitting up, I discerned by the dim light of dawn, the boy Kurt standing by the table in the middle of the room, holding my heavy sword in his small hand. He had picked it up, apparently ignorant of its weight, and knocked it heavily upon my armor, which I had placed on a stool. This aroused me. The boy stood motionless, his eyes

wide open and staring at me, his face as pale as death. At first I was confounded, but after a moment's effort in collecting my senses, I asked him what he wanted. There was no answer. Very reluctantly I got out of bed and approached him, placing my hand on his shoulder and speaking to him again. Still there was no response. He remained standing, his eyes fixed upon me. Finally, I grasped his disengaged hand. As I did so, a sudden tremor convulsed his body. The sword fell from his hand once more, crashing against the armor. He then sank moaning to the floor. A moment later he looked at me with a more natural expression and asked where he was. Raising him up, I told him that he was in my room. 'How did I come here?" he anxiously inquired.

" 'That is more than I can tell,' I answered, 'save that thou camest unbidden through the door, which I left unlocked.' The boy meditated a moment, then suddenly cried: 'I know, I have been walking in my sleep again. Oh, sir; good Sir Knight, please do not tell them anything about it—they will beat me most unmercifully.'

" 'Who will beat thee?' I asked.

" 'My father and my stepmother,' he replied.

"Ere he had pronounced those words, he uttered a cry of despair. His stepmother stood in the doorway, looking furiously at him. Possibly the noise had

attracted her to my room; but before approaching, she had taken care to attire herself most becomingly. She had evidently overheard my conversation with Kurt, for she did not question him, but boldly advanced and proceeded to lead the trembling boy from the room by the ear.

"Regardless of my personal appearance, though shaking with the cold, I was at his side in a moment. Bowing to the lady in her white frills and blue ribbons, I begged her to leave the lad with me, as I wanted to read him a lecture, after which I would deliver him to her. Smiling sweetly, she agreed to my proposition and left the room. I bolted the door after her and quickly got back under the bed clothes. It was some time before my chattering teeth allowed me to speak, but when I did, I told the boy to take a seat near me. In great trepidation the poor fellow seated himself. I soon reassured him and bade him tell me his history. I learned that he had led a miserable life for some years past. His mother had died and his father had married again, ever since which event they had grievously maltreated him. 'I must have walked in my sleep, Sir Knight,' said he, 'because I was dreaming of those exciting stories you told. I remember nothing else about it. For a long time I have not been thus guilty of wandering about at night, my father and mother having beaten it out of me.'

"I greatly pitied the poor lad, and suddenly bethought of taking him into my service.

"When I proposed it to him, he was beside himself with joy, but told me that he felt sure that his father would not consent to it. I agreed with the lad; and sooner than make more trouble considered whether there were not some way by which I might secretly abduct him. During the recital of his woes he had stated, that, every morning, before any one had arisen, he rode on old horse to market, returning after breakfast. I instructed him to take the best horse in his father's stable, and to wait for me a mile down the road, concealed in the bushes, and keeping a good lookout. Day was dawning as we concluded our arrangements. Soon after, on looking out of my window, I had the satisfaction of seeing him start, riding a fine young horse. Feeling somewhat chilly, I went back to bed, and naturally enough fell asleep again; so it was late when I met my hostess at breakfast. She seemed a little embarrassed, but as nothing was said about our night's adventures, made herself very agreeable to me; while her husband sat opposite with eyes closed and his head resting on his hand.

"As the hour for Kurt's return had long since past, she expressed her wonder at his long absence. Inwardly I chuckled: 'What will ye say, ye evil people,

when ye find that your son is gone, and with him the best horse from the stable?'

"At last, bidding my host and hostess farewell, I saddled my own steed and departed. Half an hour's ride brought me to where the patient boy lay in hiding. He joined me, mounted on a beautiful horse of the best Hungarian breed. He had been anxiously waiting for me for many hours. Luckily I had brought with me plenty of provisions for the day. The hungry lad, who had had no breakfast, satisfied himself to his heart's content, and realizing that he was leaving his tormentors farther and farther behind, made his horse caper and prance along the road, in his exhilaration. That valuable little steed, fair ladies and kind sirs, is now my property, and ridden by Kurt, who is my devoted page. This ends my story, and I hope no one will blame me for abducting both lad and horse, though I fear my merry host and hostess thought it an ill return for their hospitality."

Laughing comments greeted this story. Goblets were refilled, and a veteran knight, a near neighbor and staunch friend of the Falkenstein household, arose to propose the health of "the Duke and Duchess, exemplary in all things, beloved and honored by all their friends and subjects; may they live to rule this goodly land for many years to come."

The Duke made his acknowledgments in words which went to every heart; while the Duchess, before touching her cup with her lips, smiled benignly across the table at Ursula and Conrad.

Duke Henry then requested an old minstrel with flowing white hair and silvery beard, who sat near him, to sing. This hale and hearty bard of four score years had been Wolfram's teacher. Though the pupil had long since outdone the master, his song was listened to with sympathetic attention, and roundly applauded.

Once more, upon request, he sang in a trembling, yet still rich bass voice; this time it was a favorite air of the Princess, in which at the last stanza, Wolfram joined with his thrilling tenor. The latter left his seat, goblet in hand, and approached his old preceptor. Touching cups with him, he said: "Thou didst teach me that song, old friend, for which I bless thee; and, should I survive, when thou art gone to the land of eternal song beyond, I shall sing it, aye, to my dying day, in honor of her whom we both admire and love so well."

This delicate compliment of Wolfram's did not escape Ursula, nor did the guests fail to catch its meaning; so with one accord they arose, shouting: "Long live the Princess and her worthy minstrels, the famous master and twice famous pupil!"

To put an end to further toasting Wolfram quickly resumed his seat and began one of his merriest songs, creating general hilarity and well-nigh bringing a very corpulent knight to an untimely end by causing him to choke with laughter.

This being happily averted, the banquet ended with an ancient Teutonic song, led by the old minstrel, in the chorus of which everyone joined.

After nightfall they all assembled on the terrace in the rear of the palace, from which broad steps led down to the garden walks.

The Duchess was there on her invalid couch, the Duke, Ursula, Conrad and Wolfram standing near, watching the dark moonlight shadows on the velvety grass.

All were in sympathy with the beauty of the hour. They felt drawn to each other, these lovers, young and old.

Wolfram had sent for Kurt and then immediately dismissed him from his mind. Suddenly, however, the boy appeared before him.

"Ah, here thou art," said Wolfram. "I sent for thee to ask why thou, in today's race, didst pull back thy horse, and allow that pale-faced lad to snatch the prize from thee? This is not at all like my gallant page Kurt. I feel ashamed of him."

"I am sorry to have displeased you, Sir Knight," answered the boy, "but I had a good reason for doing what I did, which, by your leave, I would rather not give."

"I wish to know it," replied the minstrel. "Thou needst not be afraid of anyone here; the Princess and Knight Conrad are well disposed toward thee. Thou surely wert not afraid of thy horse's behavior! I know thee better than that."

"No, Sir Knight," answered the boy, blushing crimson; "there is another reason."

"Then tell it," said his master. "I insist."

"If I must, I will," said Kurt, after a momentary pause. "My friend who won the race is but a sickly youth; his father is dead; his mother is very poor and entirely dependent upon him. The Princess knows her and has frequently helped her in her many misfortunes. The race was for a money stake. He needed it, while I did not"—here the boy hesitated.

"How now!" exclaimed his master; "hast thou so much money then?"

"No, my lord," replied Kurt, "but you are good to me, and I have no mother to care for me, or to depend on me for support."

"Thou didst a good action, my boy," said Wolfram; "but if thou wouldst get along in the world, have not too soft a heart. I can, however, but approve of what

thou hast done in this case," he added, patting the boy's head; "and now, go and take good care of thy brave little horse and also mine."

Conrad detained Kurt and drew Wolfram aside. After a few minutes' conversation with the minstrel, he asked the boy if he would be willing to leave his benefactor's employ and enter his service. "Thy master tells me that he needs a full-grown and stronger man, and is willing to let thee go."

The surprised lad regarded first his master and then Conrad. He had already learned to look upon our hero as the noblest and bravest knight in all Christendom; yet he felt greatly attached to the minstrel.

He did not answer the young knight's question, but looking rather pleased than otherwise, stood scratching his head in rustic perplexity. Wolfram, noticing his quandary, and at the same time his beaming face, said: "I am sorry to lose thee, Kurt; but as my good friend here is in need of an attendant, I cannot wish him a better one. Do thou by him as thou hast done by me." Kurt made no reply. He merely kissed the minstrel's hand and withdrew.

Ursula, who had been a silent and interested witness, now turned to Conrad, saying: "I am glad, Sir Knight, for thy sake, that thou hast secured this lad. I have a great regard for him, and am sure thou hast gained in him a devoted follower."

She took his arm and led him down the terrace steps into the garden. Thence they continued their way across the drawbridge down a romantic path, which soon brought them to a leaping rivulet, across which the trees cast their shadows in the pale moonlight.

Conrad looked at the beautiful woman walking by his side. He felt his heart strongly drawn toward her; yet strange to say, at that very moment Rosalie's sweet image arose before him, and he fell into a thoughtful silence.

Ursula, imagining that her own abstraction and want of sympathy were the cause of her companion's moodiness, made an effort to rouse her faculties to entertain and please him.

Hugo's fleeting appearance, his few murmured words, had made a deeper impression than all her champion's gallant words and deeds. The thought that, as the son of their greatest enemy, he would probably never again cross her path, sent a pang of regret to her heart. She remembered, however, what she owed to the young knight at her side. He had freed her father from imprisonment. He had released her from the persecutions of an unwelcome suitor. She admired his courage and noble character. Furthermore, she felt a partiality for him which she was not able to account for, even to herself. So long as Hugo's image

remained in her thoughts, however, she could not give her heart outright. Yet so deeply did she sympathize with Conrad in his homeless, kinless condition, that she felt inwardly disposed, if possible, to banish Hugo, the intruder, from her heart.

Having arrived at this disposition, she at once proceeded to use her wonderful gifts in pleasing her companion, to which no one could remain long indifferent.

They wandered on to the valley, under the listening willows, whose fantastic shapes grew more weird in the deepening shades of night.

She had gathered some forget-me-nots and now handed them to Conrad, asking him to keep them in remembrance of their walk. As she did this, she looked into his face with such affectionate gratitude and sympathy that he would fain have thrown himself at her feet and declared his love. That danger past, their conversation turned on his brother, brought up at Falkenstein, who, as she admitted, had been her favorite of all her father's squires. She then questioned him as to his past life and adventures.

To these questions Conrad gave graphic and enthusiastic answers, bringing some of the exciting past vividly before the eyes of his deeply interested listener. By the time they had retraced their steps to the drawbridge, she had so far worked herself into his heart that the misgivings of Rosalie came well-nigh being justi-

fied; but again that night, as the image of that sweet child presented itself to him, he felt that his whole heart had not yet gone out to Ursula; nor did he imagine that the love which the noble, tender-hearted Princess had shown for him was other than the affection of a sympathizing and grateful friend. Musing thus he fell peacefully asleep.

CHAPTER XI.

TRUE LOVE.

"The mountain rill
Seeks with no surer flow the far, bright sea,
Than my unchanged affections flow to thee."

—*Benjamin.*

On the day following the great festival, many of the guests separated for their respective destinations. Toward evening Conrad and Ursula went for another stroll, a repetition of the last, with this difference, that this time they avoided all romantic topics. Later, they repaired to the hall, where they found the Duke and Duchess and Wolfram, who sang to their great delight. Presently Ursula sang to her own accompaniment, with a melodious but not powerful voice, yet with so much feeling and expression that Conrad was deeply stirred. Several days of serene enjoyment passed swiftly by, the week ending, as we have already seen, with the coming of Saladin from Waldhorst Castle.

On the morning following Saladin's arrival the gallant young knight presented the noble steed to Ursula.

At first she hesitated to accept so valuable a gift, but finally consented to do so, at the earnest and repeated solicitations of her persistent and devoted champion. He rode, instead, the fiery charger which had served him so well in the tournament. Together they cantered over hill and dale, enjoying every passing moment.

At times they would go on some mission of charity; at others, on a visit to a neighboring castle. Kurt always accompanied them, astride of his own good Hungarian, presented to him by his former master at their parting. Nothing could exceed the happiness of the boy in his new service. He adored the Princess as though she were a saint; while Conrad, as we well know, was his ideal of knighthood. Wherever they stopped, whether at the poor man's hut, or at the castle of the rich Baron, he was at their horses' heads as they dismounted. A month thus passed, while the Princess' admiration for her companion daily increased. He would surely have satisfied her highest ideal of manhood, had it not been for those fleeting glances exchanged with that dark-eyed youth.

Conrad seemed under an unconscious spell while in her presence, the image of Rosalie growing fainter day by day.

It was during their rides that Conrad learned the goodness and tenderness of Ursula's heart, and he

loved her for those qualities as much as for her beauty and accomplishments. At one time she might be seen on Saladin, performing deeds of fearless horsemanship; at another, soothing the sick and dying with her tender ministrations.

Although nearly two months had passed without a word of love having been spoken by Conrad, he had become in the eyes of the little world around the accepted lover of the Princess Ursula. He had on occasions declared himself her devoted knight, was ever at her side, ready at all times to do her bidding; and Ursula, as little as she was aware of it herself, could not have borne his absence for a day.

While Cupid was sowing the seeds of love deeply in their hearts, memory planted little tares. The young, dark-eyed hunter could not be entirely forgotten on the one hand; on the other, Rosalie would ever and anon assert herself most unexpectedly.

Had fate decreed to separate these two young beings it is reasonable to suppose that their remembrance of the other two would have died away and been replaced by their mutual longing for each other; now, however, they were somehow a constant menace.

Thus the summer sped away almost imperceptibly, the dying leaves telling of its departure in their noiseless descent, seeking rest on the peaceful lap of Mother Earth; significant to Ursula's mind of some of the worn

and weary souls which, in that autumnal season, would shed their withered bodies and rise to find eternal rest with God.

As the days gradually shortened, there were frequent intervals of rain and storm. These, however, did not dampen the spirits of the indefatigable Wolfram. He came the oftener from his neighboring castle, enlivening the evenings with story and song. His friendship for Conrad grew stronger each day, although he could not fail to notice the apparent understanding existing between the beautiful woman he adored and the gallant youth whom he had taken to his heart as a brother.

At last, one evening, Conrad was sitting with Ursula in the recess of a window in one of the lower rooms of the palace. A flood of brilliant moonlight with its soft radiance illumined the expressive countenance of the Princess. Each seemed to feel that a beautiful and sublime moment of life was at hand, the memory of which would last forever. They had become aware that they were essential to each other's happiness, though the tares still grew in their Garden of Eden. Then Conrad, on bended knee, told his love with all the fervency and pathos which he could command. Ursula gently bade him rise, sit beside her, and listen.

Placing her soft, white hand in his, and raising her beautiful appealing eyes to his face, she said: "My

own true friend! my noble, valiant and gallant knight! need I tell thee that I love thee? Thou knowest it! and yet, to love thee as I ought, in order to guard forever thy happiness and mine is a matter of great moment. It involves everything in this world; aye, that our heaven shall begin here, on earth, to last throughout eternity. Do I love thee sufficiently for this? I have my misgivings. How is it with thee? Dost thou not feel as I do? Thou need'st not answer me. I have read thy heart even as thou hast read mine. Let us then, for each other's sake, wait a season longer. If in another year, or sooner, we find that we can be all in all to each other, be it so. I shall hail the day as the happiest of my life; because I shall know from that moment that thou canst trust thy happiness to my keeping."

Conrad, imprinting a tender kiss upon the hand he held, replied: "My adored one, what shall I say? Rather would I die at this very moment than run any risk of causing thee unhappiness or even one moment's regret! Let us wait then, and hope, trusting in each other, and in God." He arose, still holding her hand, and pressed his lips ever so gently to her burning cheek. They thus arrived at an understanding full of mutual trust.

After that evening nothing unusual occurred at the Castle of Falkenstein. Conrad daily exercised with his

sword. Later on, as the season for the chase came near, he practiced at target shooting with the cross-bow.

One evening toward the end of September, Duke Henry announced his purpose of starting within a few days on his annual hunting expedition to the Black Forest, and desired Conrad to hold himself in readiness to accompany him. In subsequent discussions of the matter they learned to their delight that Ursula had determined to ride with them as far as the Benedictine Monastery. Her object which, as yet, she kept secret from Conrad, was to visit Rosalie at the Convent of St. Agnes, not only that she might see and know her, but for the sake of her own future peace of mind.

A few days thereafter, on a bracing September morning, amid the blowing of horns and barking of hounds, the Duchess from her window waved a farewell to Ursula, mounted on Saladin, and the ever-faithful Conrad at her side.

"God bless them," murmured the Duchess, as her heart swelled with pride on noting their handsome bearing. The Duke waved his hand to his wife in salute, as soon after he also crossed the drawbridge, followed by some twenty well-equipped attendants and the dogs.

Conrad looked into his companion's face. He marked her color heightening in the bracing wind, as it blew back from her forehead the luxuriant hair. With her nostrils slightly dilated, her eyes turned heavenward, he could but compare her to one of the goddesses, who were supposed to come to earth for the sole purpose of bewitching mankind.

When, after eight hours riding, the spires of the convent appeared in the distance, Rosalie once again for a moment claimed our young knight's wandering thoughts.

She, poor child, had been immured for more than four months in a state of utter ignorance as to the outside world, until a few weeks before this stage of our story. Then, in spite of all the vigilance of the Abbess, the news of Conrad's victory at the tournaments and his prolonged stay at Falkenstein had somehow reached her ears.

It was nearly dark when the travelers halted at a newly erected inn, not far from the ferry by which, on the following day, they would cross the river to the hunting grounds. The landlord was placed on his mettle in making such distinguished guests comfortable. Ursula, being fatigued from her long ride, retired early.

Seated before a blazing fire of logs, the Duke and Conrad listened to the innkeeper's voluble talk.



Conrad looked into his companion's face.



Among other things they learned that some three months before, while the peasants and mechanics were at work building his inn, ghosts were frequently seen at the ruins of Grunau Castle; but that, of late, they seemed to have disappeared. Nevertheless the peasantry still remained in mortal terror of the place, none of them daring to enter it after dark.

"I went there myself one night, however," he continued, "and satisfied myself that the ghosts are living flesh and bones, and the jolliest of their kind. I informed the workmen of my discovery, but they did not believe me, so I left them to their superstition."

"What saw you there?" asked Conrad, becoming much interested.

"With your leave, good sirs, I will tell you all that happened," replied the man. "On my arrival here, before I was comfortably quartered in this house, I used to wander about late wondering at the strange apparitions. One night I walked up the hill as far as the garden in the rear of the monastery. On arriving there, I entered the open gate. There were lights moving about, and there was revelry in the rear buildings. Before I could account for this strange revelation, a back door suddenly opened. Over a score of figures in flowing white robes, carrying lights, stole forth into the night. I quickly hid myself behind a tree to watch them. They crossed the garden, halted before a wall

very near the spot where I stood, and opening a trap-door, disappeared underground, one by one. I was utterly nonplussed. While revolving the matter in my mind, I stepped out upon the hillside, overlooking the landscape shrouded with night. Glancing aimlessly around, I discovered the usual lights in the ruins of Grunau. It instantly occurred to me that they were the same that I had just seen at the monastery. I ran down the hill, and climbed up a breach in the rear of the ruined battlements. Looking down into the banquet room, I saw the same figures in white engaged in various freaks, flaunting their lights in all directions. This was indeed a revelation; but I deemed it expedient to get away unperceived, and to keep my own counsel as to what I had seen and heard. The Abbot is certainly a holy man, but, as you may know, likes his fun at times. I thought it would do no harm, kind sirs, to relate my discovery to you."

Conrad was much amused at his narrative. He in turn related his own experiences in the banquet hall some four months previous. The Duke, expressing his astonishment at having slept through all those ghostly performances, determined, at the first opportunity, to take the Abbot to task for that night's doings. The ghost stories being ended, they retired to their comfortable quarters.

Early next morning the Duke and Conrad went to examine the ruins. As soon as they were out of sight Ursula wended her way to the Convent of St. Agnes.

At the dilapidated castle our friends found on investigation that through the closets in the banquet hall a rear platform giving access to the panels could be reached. On the back of the portraits they discovered skillfully designed slides and incisions, by which their features might be moved aside and human faces inserted instead. By means of larger slides the entire older picture of the master of Grunau might be brought back to view. The suits of mail, fitted on the wooden figures, could easily be removed and donned by anyone wishing to assume the guise of a spectre sentinel. As for the appearance of the Abbot's image, it was only left to them to conjecture that the old prelate, being versed in occult sciences, as were most of the priests of that day, had produced the spectral illusion. The causes of the apparitions and the unearthly noises on that memorable night being thus accounted for, it was very clear to Conrad's mind that a clever practical joke had been played upon him, under the leadership of the Abbot; and he expressed his willingness to aid his friend, the Duke, in chastising his holiness for his share of the spectacle.

They forthwith proceeded to the monastery, where they were joyfully greeted by the reverend father,

whose nose was, if anything, redder than ever. The Duke immediately began to banter him about the spectral manifestations at the ruins, inquiring of his reverence if he had ever made the acquaintance of the disreputable characters who infested the dilapidated building at night. "Don't speak of them, my lord," answered the Abbot, who had noted a quizzical expression in his friend's face, "they have kept me awake many a night; and should they trouble me again, I shall find means for banishing them forever. It is astonishing," he added, his eyes twinkling mischievously as he laid his finger beside his jolly nose, "how fond they are of my wine-cellar, which, to say the least, shows shockingly unbecoming taste in residents of the spirit world; but of late I have kept my cellar locked, and shall keep its contents for such excellent friends as thou, noble Duke and valiant Knight. But," he resumed, more seriously, specially addressing himself to Conrad, "if those ghosts have ever appeared to thee, Sir Knight, and informed thee concerning the destruction of yonder castle and the abduction of a little girl, they have told the truth. I myself saw it all. My brother died in my arms, and I trust his murderer may be punished for his crimes, although," he added, crossing himself, "it is not for me to judge." "I heard that story, holy father," answered Conrad, laughing, "on the night when the Duke and I slept in the banquet

hall, I was there made to swear vengeance against Count Hans for that particular deed of his, which does not concern me in the least. Those goblin freaks were evidently intended to impress me more than they did; yet I must confess I thought I saw the veritable ghost of the Baron von Grunau, although, when it threatened me, I called it 'an old fossil.' Nevertheless I took the oath; not that it matters, for it is but one of the many vows I have made to punish Hans von Waldhorst."

"We shall be sure to meet him in the Black Forest," interposed the Duke; "but thou must promise me to leave him first to my tender mercies. I would teach him a lesson which he shall never forget. Should I fail in doing it effectually, then, Conrad, thou shalt see that the madman be rendered incapable of further mischief." To this Conrad assented.

"May God and the Holy Virgin be with you both," said the Abbot, "and preserve you from harm. I trust to hear good accounts from you through your messengers to Falkenstein, who shall be welcome at the inn at our expense."

The Duke promised to keep the Abbot well informed as to their movements. In bidding him farewell, he added in a tone of mock foreboding that he hoped those spectres would leave him in peace hereafter.

"My own ghost is buried for good," replied the Abbot, laughing heartily; "it has fulfilled its mission. Farewell! I shall pray at vespers and early mass for your safe return."

As they repaired to the inn Conrad observed Ursula approaching from another direction. Meeting her at the door, he learned that she had been to the convent and had seen Rosalie. This child, since her entrance into the convent, had studied faithfully in the hope that the day Conrad would see her again, she might be as accomplished as the Princess of Falkenstein.

The Abbess had given her special instruction in singing. She had developed a beautiful voice. Loving music with all her heart, as it seemed to bring her nearer to her hero, she astonished her teacher by her wonderful progress in the art, as yet little known in Germany, where it was taught exclusively by minstrels and highly educated nuns.

In telling Conrad where she had been, Ursula seemed much agitated. She requested that she might speak to him alone.

Passing into a sunny room overlooking the river, she sat down by him, and placing a soft, cold hand on his, she thus spoke, rapidly:

"I went, as I have said, to the convent to see Rosalie, thy preserver, and as thou hast called her to me, thy

adopted sister," looking intently, meanwhile, in Conrad's face. He met her gaze unflinchingly. "On entering the convent garden," she resumed, "I heard some one singing, not far off. Requesting the nun who had admitted me to await me at the main entrance, I went in the direction from which the exquisite voice seemed to proceed. Moving cautiously, I perceived a lovely girl leaning upon the casement of the open window, apparently addressing the birds in answer to their warblings as they flitted about in the trees.

"As I approached near enough to see her face distinctly, she changed her exhilarating notes to those of sad appeal to her feathered friends, which affected me greatly. Again her rich voice struck a more joyous strain, ending with inspiriting words to the little songsters, and some brilliant imitations of their notes.

"It was a lovely sight and one which I shall never forget. I believe I remember the words of her song. I will write them down for thee—before we part!"

Ursula's voice trembled as she said this. With some effort she continued: "I was afterward admitted into the convent. The Abbess received me most affectionately. She asked me several questions concerning myself and thee, my devoted knight, which I answered as best I could. I then told her that I had come to see Lady Rosalie. This was against the rule;

but when I informed her that it was for the sake of one most dear to me, as well as for my own happiness, she consented, and went herself to bring her to me."

"When left alone, my dear Conrad," she resumed with suppressed emotion, "I looked out into the garden. Seeing the autumn leaves upon the ground, I had a foreboding, though from no accountable cause, that I, too, should lie withered before another year had passed." Tears gathered in her eyes as she spoke. Conrad took her hand tenderly within his own. She did not withdraw it. Recovering her voice, she continued: "The door opened and Rosalie stood before me, the same apparition I had seen at the open window, whose song had so deeply affected me. I have never seen anyone half so lovely. Her raven hair, only partially hidden by the novice's cap, burst its bounds in luxuriant masses all around her head—and such a face. I cannot describe it. Conrad von Rheinstein! thou hast seen that face, and knowing her as thou dost, how canst thou help loving her?"

Ursula, though smiling the while, asked this question with excitement. She attempted gently to withdraw her hand, but he retained his hold. Bringing it to his lips, he said, "I might have loved this child but for thee, Ursula. Thy beauty, together with the nobleness of thy spirit have driven all else from my heart.

I am this day, more than ever, thy devoted knight, to live for, and if need be, die for thee." He was about to fall on his knees before her, when she restrained him. With a trembling voice she besought him to be seated and listen to what else she had to relate.

"Rosalie gazed at me for some time without speaking," she continued, "nor could I utter a single word. At last she spoke in a voice that was music itself, asking me if I had not come with a message from thee. At the same time she extended both hands to me with a smile which found its way straight to my heart. I caught her in my arms. I kissed her, assuring her that I had come unknown to thee, wishing to see and learn to love one of whom I had heard so much.

" 'He is near then?' she said, quickly placing her little hand on her heart; 'I feel it here. Tell me he is well and happy!'

" 'I think he is,' I answered.

" 'Then tell him,' she replied, looking straight into my eyes, 'that I am well and happy, too, and that I love him with all my heart and soul!'

"I promised her I would tell thee," Ursula added, in as firm a voice as she could command, and suddenly paused. Conrad regarded her with feelings difficult to describe. Presently she went on: "For a time this wonderful girl scanned me so intently with

her dark eyes, I could hardly meet her gaze, then asked, abruptly: 'Hast thou, noble Princess, anything to do with his happiness?'

"Scarcely knowing how to reply, I hesitated; seeing my embarrassment, she said: 'If so, I shall bless thee, because thou art more beautiful and nobler'—her very words, Conrad—'than any other woman in the world. Thou canst not fail to make him happy.'

"It was impossible to longer restrain myself; so placing both arms around this sweet, lovely, innocent creature, so faithful and loving, I found relief in tears.

"Controlling myself, I bade her sit by me. I then told this child, who loves thee, Conrad, so well, that thou and I were very dear to each other, but that until we were both satisfied that we loved each other exclusively, we would never become betrothed. Did I do right?" she asked, suddenly turning to him her beautiful pale face.

"Yes," replied Conrad, pressing her hand to his wildly beating heart, "but as I have told thee thou art all the world to me, it now only needs thy decision to seal our fate!"

She was silent for some time, looking at him with conflicting emotions. "Conrad," she faltered, "since this girl loves thee so fondly, ought I to try not to love thee so much?" As she said this she blushed deeply in spite of herself.

Conrad gazed at her in mute astonishment. He had listened to another woman's praise from the lips of her whose every word was to him an oracle. She had never appeared to him half so attractive as at that moment. In pleading for another, she had spoken for herself, unawares, better than she could have done in any other way; for she had revealed the inmost recesses of her own heart.

Realizing this, she blushed, betraying for the first time, in his presence, the deepest confusion. And Conrad? He sank down at her feet. The next moment he held her in his arms, kissing her again and again. She submitted for a while; then, gently extricating herself, she said, roguishly, "I shall be more careful what I tell thee in the future, my bold, my beloved knight, if the consequences be such as these; though," with a loving, lingering look at him, "I shall never, never regret this happy moment." She then quickly left the room.

The knight sat for some time in deep thought. The certain knowledge of Ursula's passionate love thrilled him intensely; and he well knew that he returned it with all the ardor that this beautiful woman could ask. As he mused on this subject Ursula re-entered, arrayed in a riding habit, ready to return to her father's castle. She held in her hand a parchment, which she informed Conrad was Rosalie's song to the birds, transcribed from memory. "This little paper," she added,

"fills me with sadness, for I realize my happiness and her sorrow, unless indeed she learns to forget, or should be content, as she so sweetly told me, to know thee happy with another. And now, farewell. Let us never forget this day, whatever may happen hereafter. It has brought us very near to each other, and allowed me, at least, a glimpse of that heaven on earth which is the gift of only true love."

For answer Conrad clasped her in his arms in one long, last embrace.

Presently she freed herself, and with her face glowing through happy tears, turned to go to Saladin. Conrad followed. Lifting her into the saddle, he said, "God bless thee, darling, for all thy goodness to me. From this time forth I shall live only for thee."

"Never could I be happy without thee, my gallant Conrad," answered the Princess, "we shall continue to live for each other. Think of me during our separation as fondly and as often as I shall think of thee."

Waving a final farewell, she galloped away, followed by a small escort of the Duke's attendants. On reaching home Ursula fell on her mother's breast and told of her new-found happiness.

The Duchess caressed her daughter, at the same time showing intense pleasure in her own happy eyes. She told her that now the dearest wish of her heart had been realized; that she looked forward to her re-

maining days on earth with a pleasure such as she had thought herself no longer capable of feeling. Her health soon visibly improved, and she astonished Bernard von Wolfram, who came as usual in the evening to play and sing, by rising to greet him.

But Ursula? How she missed Conrad as the days went slowly by; particularly in her daily rides. These were now almost entirely for sweet charity's sake; but in the huts of the poor she was constantly reminded of him. To Saladin she told all her heart secrets. She prayed for her knight's safety, and counted the days and hours which must intervene ere he returned. Sometimes thoughts of Rosalie would flit through her mind. She remembered that her eyes resembled those of her brother, the forester, but the deep impression the forester himself had made, had entirely faded from her thoughts. She frequently found herself contrasting Rosalie's love for Conrad with her own, but she battled with these moods and strove to be happy, after a fashion, in the absence of her lover.

Left to himself at the inn, the young knight ruminated over the joys which the future had in store for him, with much gratitude toward God, who had given to him, so unworthy of it, the love of so glorious a woman. Perceiving the parchment Ursula had brought him lying on a chair, he opened it and read the contents:

ROSALIE'S SONG.

Oh, happy birds, though leaves are falling,
 Ye sing the live-long morn;
While, yesterdays of love recalling,
 I sit, a maid forlorn.

Ye know full well that on the morrow
 Each one will find its mate;
While, desolate, I pine in sorrow,
 And bear my cruel fate.

Upheld by his fond declaration:
 "If death come not to me
Ere ends our time of separation,
 I will return to thee!"

Then you and I will sing together,
 Oh, birds so blithe and free;
We'll sing through fair or cloudy weather,
 "Te-whit! te-whit! te-whee!"

Conrad pressed the parchment tenderly to his lips, not, alas, for Rosalie, though it contained the record of her loving heart; but because of the dear hand which had transcribed the simple and touching song.

CHAPTER XII.

IN THE BLACK FOREST.

"Wilt thou hunt?
Thy hounds shall make the welkin answer them,
And fetch shrill echoes from the hollow earth."

—*Shaks.*

A two days' ride brought the Duke and Conrad, with their attendants, to the Black Forest. At its entrance they obtained from a colony of charcoal burners a guide who was greeted by the Duke as his namesake, Henry.

This guide and hunter, a middle-aged, well-made, weather-beaten fellow, knew all the intricacies of the immense forest, through which he and his fellow guides hunted at pleasure. He, at the same time, served as general overseer for the powerful nobles and barons, who were joint owners of that wild region.

Henry, the most desirable guide of all, was, with the one exception of Hugo of Waldhorst, the best marksman among the hunters who frequented the forest. For a week past he had been expecting the Duke, as usual, this season. Mean-

while, he had learned that Count Hans had already begun the chase, and that he had been seen at different points of the forest in full pursuit of an immense stag, the largest that had appeared therein in the recollection of the oldest hunters, and which, for two years past, had eluded all pursuers.

The Duke, who had himself assisted in Count Hans' former attempt to capture this noble quarry, had named it the "King of the Black Forest."

The wild Count, since the shameful treatment he had given his former friend, had been heard to declare, with a volley of terrible oaths, that this season he would, alone, ride down the stag, if it cost him every horse in the stable.

Henry knew the locality where both the stag and its pursuer had been last seen, and agreed to guide the Duke's party in that direction, where they would most probably come across their double game.

In the early morning they set forth with great eagerness to hunt the wild huntsman; yet intending to make the most of their time in the pursuit of other game. The forest proved so dense that, until they reached the wide runways of the deer, it was, at times, most difficult to penetrate on horseback. Once upon the track of game, the chase began in earnest. No one who had not experienced it can imagine the exhilaration of such sport; nor appreciate the deliciousness of

the subsequent repast and the weary hunter's sleep.

On the second day out, they rode down two fine stags, one of which they sent to Falkenstein with news of their welfare. At the end of the third day, they went into camp on a hillside, which protected them from the already chilling autumn winds. Roaring fires were lighted, and presently the smell of broiling venison greeted their grateful nostrils. As they joined in the repast, sitting near the cheerful flames, the Duke and Henry, the guide, very naturally fell to recounting some wonderful hunting stories, luckily new to Conrad.

They slept that night on a bed of forest leaves as only hunters can sleep. On the morning following the weather looked threatening. While still at breakfast a thunder-storm broke loose. The guide went outside to take a survey of the sky, when suddenly he assumed a listening attitude, the Duke and Conrad watching him with great interest. "I hear the distant cry of hounds!" he cried. "It is more than likely that we have come upon the mad Count somewhat sooner than we expected. I'll wager he is in pursuit of the King of the Forest. The fleeing stag will take one of the two runways on either side of us. We shall soon know. Listen!"

"We must capture this game from Count Hans, if it be he," said the Duke—"today, if possible. Never

mind wind or weather," added he, as the guide pointed doubtfully at the angry looking clouds.

"Then I advise that you make ready, my lord. You will not need your horses; we must proceed on foot, and at once!"

All now heard the cry of the hounds, and as it came nearer, the guide said: "They have entered the runway on our left! Follow me, noble sirs!"

Leaving the dogs and attendants behind, they ran down the thickly wooded hill, crossbows and hunting blades in hand. Their path lay through dense underbrush and over huge fallen tree trunks. In their excitement they went rapidly over every obstacle, and soon came to an open space, where they halted. "He will be certain to cross this clearing," said the guide; "it is a part of the deer's runway. He may appear at any moment! Are you ready?"

Conrad, his heart wildly thumping with expectation, set his crossbow. He well knew that they were about to do an act contrary to all the laws of the forest, and one that would be sure to excite to the utmost the ire of Count Hans; furthermore, he felt the time for his revenge had come.

Again arose the cry of the pursuing hounds; then for a moment all was still. Suddenly, on their right, there was a cracking of boughs and crashing of undergrowth. Conrad brought his crossbow to shoulder

just as an immense stag, carrying a kingly crown of antlers, burst with one tremendous bound into the open space. He let fly the bolt too quickly in his excitement, and it missed a vital part, hitting the neck instead. The wounded animal leaped high in air, causing the Duke to miss his aim, and continued on its mad flight, bearing away Conrad's bolt.

But Henry, the guide, having waited for the results of both shots, now took quick aim. His deadly shaft went through the heart of the monarch of the forest, just as he was about to disappear in the opposite thicket.

One more high leap and his conquered majesty rolled over in the underbrush. Henry was instantly at his side, and having bled him in true forester's style, dragged the body into the clearing. At that moment the hounds appeared on the scene, and began tearing the still quivering flesh.

The hunters gathered exultingly around their magnificent game, but were again startled by a loud crashing behind them. Without further warning, spear in hand, Count Hans, his head bare, his hair disheveled and saturated with rain, dashed upon them on his foaming steed, looking, indeed, like the fabled Wild Huntsman. Reining in his horse, his fiery eyes quickly took in the situation.

"Who has done this?" he roared. "Who has dared to violate my rights and cross my path in this damnable manner?"

"I am the man," replied Duke Henry, "and I claim the quarry."

"Curse thee, then," shouted Count Hans, his face livid with rage. "Dost thou mean to steal the prize which I have followed for many a day, and which, having been startled by my dogs, by the laws of this forest belongs to me? Dismounting as he made this demand, he threw down his spear, and with his short hunting sword, threateningly faced the Duke. Duke Henry calmly replied:

"Precisely so. I know the laws of the forest as well as thou; but if thou wouldst take this stag away, thou must fight for it."

"Come on then, thou cursed thief," cried Count Hans, exasperated to madness by the coolness of his adversary. "I will teach thee better manners." His heavy hunting blade was already raised; but it descended harmlessly on the still shorter weapon of the Duke, who parried the stroke with consummate skill. The infuriated Count dealt blow after blow in quick succession. He was taller and more powerfully built than the Duke; but the latter, besides being the cooler of the two, was by far the better swordsman.



But at the moment another sword parried the blow.



Conrad held his own weapon in readiness, watching what he deemed a most unequal combat by reason of their disparity in size; and prepared to spring to the aid of his friend on the slightest show either of danger to him, or of unfair dealing on the part of his adversary. Henry, the guide, stood some distance off, on the alert, crossbow in hand.

Soon Count Hans gave his calmer opponent an advantage, receiving a wound in his right side, which so enraged him that, ignoring all fighting rules, he fairly threw himself upon his smaller foe. The Duke was compelled to retreat while parrying these furious blows, yet he managed to wound his man a second time.

Immediately thereafter, however, in stepping backward he missed his footing and fell to the ground. In an instant the Count was astride his prostrate body, and aimed a deadly blow at his head; but at the moment another sword parried the blow, which spent itself harmlessly on the sod beneath.

Conrad now stood face to face with the man whom he had sworn to kill. The guide lowered his weapon, which he had raised, charged with a bolt intended for the Count.

"Oh, indeed! thou too, thou cursed hireling!" hissed the infuriated man through his set teeth; "we shall see who further dares to balk me on this day."

Conrad, fresh and more expert with the sword than either of the two combatants, and nearly as tall as his adversary, made play with him for a time. Then suddenly catching him off his guard, by a dexterous movement, he twisted the weapon out of his hand, tossing it beyond his reach.

Hans von Waldhorst, thus disarmed, stood before Conrad von Rheinstein, at his mercy. The conquered man's face at that moment was a study. He certainly expected his antagonist to run him through; but the latter hesitated, while strange visions seemed to float before his mind's eye. "Why dost thou hesitate, man, to put an end to my existence?" hoarsely muttered the Count. "Have I not done enough to deserve thy hate and merit death at thy hands?" As he said this, his face grew pale, yet he retained his defiant bearing.

"Thou hast, indeed, done all thou sayest," replied Conrad, "but I cannot strike the blow. Thou art the father of Rosalie, who saved my life. I spare thee for her sake. Go, and repent thy ways!" He lowered his hand and turned away.

Thus did our knight keep his oath of vengeance when the opportunity which he had been seeking presented itself. Count Hans made no reply, but a gradual change came over his hardened face. He grew deathly pale, staggered a few steps backward, and would have fallen, had not the Duke, who had regained

his feet, sprung to his side and caught him in his arms. He laid his enemy gently in the wet grass. He examined his wounds, from which the blood was flowing freely. He bandaged the injured side and arm as well as he could with pieces of linen torn from his own clothing; then, with a blast from his bugle, summoned his attendants. Conrad, too, came to his assistance. Together they bent over their fallen enemy, who for the time, seemed to have lost consciousness. Gradually the stricken man opened his eyes and gazed at them steadily for some moments. As he again closed them, the friends noticed that large tears had gathered on his lashes, and brimming over, ran down his palid cheeks.

"The mad spell is broken, and I trust effectually," whispered the Duke to Conrad. "I cannot help feeling pity for him now."

"Nor can I," softly answered Conrad. "How strange that it should have come to this, after all that has happened!"

"Not so strange, either, at least for thee and me," feelingly replied the Duke, "who know and love Ursula so well."

"Aye, in very truth," answered Conrad, "she is an angel, whose influence, even at a time like this, has its hold on our hearts."

The wounded man, who very possibly had heard

some of this conversation, again opened his eyes, and in a tremulous voice asked:

"Have ye, indeed, pity for so miserable a creature as I?"

"We can both pity," replied the Duke, "and also forgive all the past, if thou wilt but come to thy senses and lead a different life."

The poor Count remained silent, looking with bedimmed eyes, first at Duke Henry, and then at Conrad, who was brushing back the dripping hair from his forehead.

At last the wounded man spoke in a most pitiful, heart-broken voice, "If ye are inclined in your hearts to forgive me, I have a last boon to ask, should I die here."

"What is it?" inquired the Duke, with interest.

"It is that ye will see my body carried to my castle for burial; or, should I live to get there, that ye will send for my son and Volga, that I may see them once more before I am summoned away from this world." He ceased.

"My men will presently be here," replied the Duke. "With them I will accompany thee, and send messengers after thy son and thy adopted daughter. We shall start for Waldhorst within an hour."

"Henry, my old comrade," sobbed the Count, breaking down completely, "this is indeed too much! May

God forgive me my sins!" This was the first time since the death of his wife, that Count Hans had used the name of God, save to take it in vain.

The Duke's attendants now arrived on the scene with horses, dogs, tents and other belongings. They washed and redressed the Count's wounds, then gave him a warming draught. Lifting him upon an improvised stretcher fastened across the backs of two horses, they marched onward, taking the nearest route to Waldhorst.

Henry, the guide, was sent to apprise Hugo and Volga of their coming, who were hunting not far from home.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE WITCH'S FATAL HAND.

"How stands the great account 'twixt me and vengeance?
Tho' much is paid, yet still it owes me much;
And I will not abate a single groan."

—*Young's Revenge.*

On the evening of the day after that on which the scenes described in the foregoing chapter took place, a cavalcade of huntsmen appeared on the brow of a hill overlooking Waldhorst Castle, whose towers were illumined by the setting sun..

Borne on a stretcher lay the lord of that castle, whom the hand of fate had at last laid low in the midst of his mad career. He was unable even to raise his head. The Duke of Falkenstein and Knight Conrad rode beside him, eager to attend to his slightest behest. Count Hans stretched out his hand feebly to the Duke, saying: "I feel as if the devil within me were dead at last, and the spirit of my departed wife, looking down from heaven, were sharing my repentance. I must have been a madman indeed to have

erred as I have done; and now my sins have found me out, and I am dying when I fain would live to make amends for my past trangressions."

"No, not dying," interposed the Duke; "let us hope for a better outcome of thy injuries."

That night Conrad slept under the roof beneath which he had first seen Rosalie. Visions of her haunted his dreams all night, but naturally, alternating with the beautiful beloved image of Ursula.

Count Hans grew worse as the hours went on. It seemed to the Duke, watching at his bedside, that the end was drawing near. At the dawn of day an old retainer, the only leech of the castle, administered some new medicine. Almost immediately the patient rallied, and from that time forth continued to improve. Henry, the guide, now arrived with Hugo and Volga. We can imagine the young forester's joy at finding Duke Henry and Knight Conrad guests of his wounded father; and in noting the complete change which had come over that violent nature. The Count continued to improve. When all danger seemed past Conrad accompanied Hugo and Volga on short hunting expeditions in the woods of Waldhorst. Each day he grew fonder of the boy and more interested in the girl. The child of the woods had ridden through those wild regions since her earliest youth. She had just reached her seventeenth year, and was

passionately devoted to her adopted brother. Only once did Hugo mention Ursula's name to Conrad. He then asked abruptly if it were true that they would marry. Conrad replied that as yet no day had been fixed for their nuptials, and, in the uncertainties of life, there was no telling when it would be. It seemed preposterous, he added, that any such ordinary mortal as himself should anticipate a union with so beautiful and glorious a woman. He was quite sincere in this modest speech, and he had some vague presentiment that fate might yet prevent his marriage with the Princess.

"She is, indeed, a glorious woman!" exclaimed Hugo, looking straight into Conrad's face in a manner which reminded him of Rosalie. "I have never forgotten her since the first and only time I ever saw her, when she gave me this little image of herself, which I wear next to my heart. I have loved her ever since with a hopeless, though none the less deep-seated passion. I know not why I should tell thee this; something impels me to do so. I feel that I can trust thee with a secret which I am no longer able to shut within my heart."

Conrad looked at the handsome youth at his side in silence, and thought of the deep blush which had mantled Ursula's cheek when he had stood before her at the tournament. Reaching out his hand to him, he

said: "We are both admirers of this beautiful woman; let us be friends as well."

The youth took the proffered hand in silence. Having thus pledged their friendship, they rode on side by side.

Volga soon caught up with them, followed by an attendant carrying a splendid roebuck which the young girl had shot at long range while following its trail alone. The young men complimented her on her achievement, and for bringing home so splendid a roast for the table.

In the evenings Conrad would sit at the Count's bedside listening to the stories which he and the Duke would recount of their younger day, "before," as Hans von Waldhorst put it, "he had sold his soul to the devil." Of the darker experiences of later years he never spoke, save once, when the attack on Castle Grunau was alluded to. According to his story, it was the outcome of a personal quarrel between the Baron and himself; and as the former had every chance of defending himself, and he himself had lost a great many men in assaulting the formidable stronghold, it seemed to be a mere chance of war that he should have come off victor. The little girl, who was one of the few creatures found alive when he finally entered the castle, he had adopted, naming her Volga. Together with his wife, he, for some years at least, had

brought her up with a fair amount of care. Later on, she had been allowed to accompany Hugo, roaming at will through the hunting grounds. She had thus become an excellent shot and fearless rider.

When Count Hans learned that his daughter, Rosalie, was being educated at the Convent of St. Agnes, he expressed not only great satisfaction, but the hope that she might be permitted to return home at the end of her trial year. The Duke and Conrad considered the request a reasonable one, inasmuch as so complete a change had taken place in her father's heart.

Our hero promised to call for her at the convent and bring her to Waldhorst in the spring.

At the end of two weeks, Count Hans, whose wounds were fast healing, grew so much better that he was able to sit up. Duke Henry and Knight Conrad decided to return to Falkenstein within the next three days; the former sent a messenger forthwith to his daughter, informing her of their intended departure from Waldhorst, and of the great change which had taken place in the Count.

Conrad became wild with joy in the anticipation of soon clasping Ursula to his heart.

It was a touching sight to mark the old Count, now convalescent, and utterly repentant, as he endeavored to please his guests. The latent good in his nature, which for so many years had been dormant, now be-

gan to crop out little by little. He begged his friends to delay their departure, and exacted a promise from them to repeat their visit in the following year. Hugo and Volga also manifestly regretted the proposed departure of our young knight. Suddenly, on the eve of that very day, an unexpected and alarming change took place in the Count's condition. His wounds had healed, apparently; but in the night, after his usual medicine had been administered, he was seized with severe chills, which completely prostrated him. In the morning symptoms for the worse were so plainly visible in his face that his friends postponed their departure, and as a relapse became certain, the Duke sent a second messenger to Falkenstein announcing the fact.

When all remedies failed to give the Count relief it was decided, as a last resort, to consult the old witch of Waldhorst, the efficacy of whose herbs and potions were well known. Conrad was sent to interview her. As he entered the hut, he was appalled at the change which had come over its inmate. Coughing incessantly, and fearfully emaciated, she stood before him. Her eyes, more deeply sunken than ever, seemed literally to burn in their sockets.

Fully aware of all that was going on at the castle,

she refused to provide any of her remedies for Count Hans, saying, it would be useless, as his hour was at hand.

"In five days' time," she added, "on the anniversary of my son's death, Count Hans will die in agony, and I shall be there to see him suffer."

Conrad was horrified. Disheartened and oppressed with evil forebodings which he could not put away from him, he returned to the sick chamber. The uncertainty of his return to Ursula only added to the disquietude of his heart. He found the Duke with the patient, who had just expressed the wish to see his daughter Rosalie once more before he died, that he might ask her forgiveness.

Conrad offered to bring her to him without delay, and forthwith departed. Hugo accompanied him to a secret ford in the river known, besides to himself, only to his father, sister and some of his most trusted men. This route shortened the distance to the Benedictine Monastery by at least two leagues. Guiding their horses successfully across they separated on the opposite bank, Hugo returning to Waldhorst. Conrad pursued his way alone, through the night, and arrived at the monastery at sunrise. There he soon roused the Abbot. The holy man was astounded at his report of the Count's changed mental condition and his heart somewhat softened toward "that repent-

ant old sinner," as he called him. He went immediately to the convent and succeeded, not without trouble, however, in arranging for Rosalie's visit to the bedside of her dying father. An hour later, the young girl, closely veiled, mounted on a well-caparisoned mule, passed out of the convent gate, accompanied by two nuns.

Conrad, with two mounted monks, awaited this novel procession at the inn. As the young girl passed him, he thought he perceived a slight movement of her hand as though in greeting. It was entirely involuntary on her part, her heart having almost leaped into her throat at the sight of him; but as it brought a response, the girl's happiness was complete. No one else noticed what would have been deemed a mutual greeting.

Though on so mournful a mission, great was Rosalie's joy in knowing that Conrad was near. When the monks requested him to take the lead that he might point out the way, she could hardly contain herself.

There, just before her, in his green hunting suit, looking handsomer than ever, and mounted on a beautiful steed, sat the man whom she loved with all her heart. She continued feasting her eyes on him.

It was dark when they reached the secret ford. Conrad was on the point of attempting to cross it ahead of Rosalie, when she called out to him not to try doing

so at so late an hour. These were the only words she had addressed to the young knight on their way; and he, in answer to the sweet, familiar voice, looking at the veiled figure in silence gave up the attempt. Pursuing the longer way, he arrived with his party two hours later at Waldhorst.

Rosalie went immediately to her father's bedside, remaining with him all night. She kept him during that time from again relapsing into delirium. When she joined the nuns at daylight, she told them, with tears in her eyes, that her father had just fallen into a deep sleep encircled by her arms.

Conrad lay awake all night with an unaccountable anxiety and an intense longing for Ursula. Early next morning he accompanied Rosalie and her monastic cortege from Waldhorst Castle as far as the secret ford. That was more happiness for the girl, though of short duration, and none the less enjoyable for coming after a night of sorrow.

Not a word was spoken between them; but in spite of rules and watchful eyes fixed upon her, Rosalie brought her hand close to her veiled lips at parting and waved it to Conrad. The gallant young knight, in spite of his anxious heart, kissed his to her in return.

Feeling assured that they had been seen, and being repentant for that reason alone for having transgressed



He accompanied Rosalee and her monastic cortege.



the rules, she begged the nuns to promise that they would say nothing to the Abbess about the parting salute. This they did, and moreover, kept their word.

That morning the Count seemed more quiet; and later in the day conversed with his friends, expressing his approval and pleasure at hearing the Duke's proposition to adopt Rosalie as his daughter, on her leaving the convent. Toward evening, however, reaction set in, and as the night advanced the patient grew so much worse than the combined strength of Conrad and Henry, the guide, was necessary to hold him in bed.

On the day following, the fifth since the relapse occurred, the Count expressed himself as conscious that the end was drawing near. Until the evening he was perfectly calm, speaking gratefully to, and blessing his friends for their goodness to him. Soon after taking his last draught of medicine he showed signs of suffering acutely. As there was no delirium, the Duke announced his intention of remaining all night with the dying man, promising to call Conrad or the guide in case of need. His suffering grew more intense as the hours dragged by. Close upon midnight his agony seemed to have reached a climax. Suddenly his eyes, wild with horror, became fixed on some object before him. "My God!" he cried, "look! there she stands! take her away! she is mocking me!"

Fearing the return of delirium, the Duke was about to summon assistance, when turning his eyes in the direction in which those of the Count were riveted, he saw, to his horror, the Witch of Waldhorst, with wild, unearthly eyes, standing at the foot of the bed, and pointing with her long, bony finger at her old enemy. A mocking laugh broke appallingly from her shriveled lips on the silence of the death chamber as she cried:

"Thine hour has come at last, Count Hans von Waldhorst, as I predicted. I am here to see thee suffer! Ha! Ha! Ha!" again came that terrible laugh which nearly froze the Duke's blood. "Take her away!" cried Count Hans, gasping for breath, "merciful God! she is killing me!" That cry awoke Conrad, who ran into the sick-room and saw the Count sitting up in bed, staring wildly before him. He followed his look but saw nothing, the witch having vanished.

The Duke told Conrad of the apparition. He immediately ran into the hall, searching everywhere, but no trace of the witch could he find.

Returning to the chamber, he saw the Duke bending over the dying man, watching his feeble gasps, as that broken spirit took its gradual flight to the realms beyond, there to await the judgment of an all-merciful God.

That night the Witch of Waldhorst disappeared.

She was never seen or heard of again. Her old hut remained standing, though utterly deserted. No one dared to enter, nor cared to remove it.

The Duke sent a messenger to Ursula, informing her of the Count's death, and stating that he and Conrad would return to Falkenstein on the day after the funeral. Conrad's suspicions were aroused as to the actual cause of the late sufferer's sudden relapse as well as the manner of his death. Summoning the old servant, who had administered the medicine, he questioned him. The man at first denied all knowledge of the witch; but on being closely pressed, finally confessed that he had obtained his remedies from her; and inasmuch as they had proved most efficacious in previous cases, he had no hesitation in administering them to the Count. Conrad's suspicions were confirmed; and on further questioning, the servant admitted that the witch had been actually within the servants' hall close upon the midnight hour.

Conrad thought it best not to mention his discoveries to anyone else at the castle. He nevertheless instituted a private search for the wretched woman. It, however, proved entirely fruitless.

On a cold, clear afternoon, two days thereafter, the remains of Count Hans were laid beside those of his fair wife, in the little graveyard on the hill, not far from the castle.

As they stood around the grave, Hugo's eyes wandered over the distant landscape in deep thought. His father's wild life, and at the end his happy reconciliation with the Duke and Conrad, as well as the latter's betrothal to Ursula, all came surging into his mind. He murmured to himself: "A strange world indeed, this world of ours, and not so beautiful to me as I once thought it."

Suddenly his keen eyes caught sight of something in the distance. On looking more closely, he thought he could distinguish mounted men in armor, bodies of lanzknechts moving in the plain, and apparently toward them.

Though considerably alarmed, he said nothing until the sad obsequies were over. On returning to the castle, he pointed in the direction, stating what he had seen to his friends. They hurried within the walls, and sent mounted messengers in different directions to ascertain the meaning of this sudden appearance of armed men.

The Duke felt fully convinced that Prince Steffel of Pomerania was about to carry out the threat made at the tournament, and invade the Principality of Falkenstein. Learning by chance of their presence at Waldhorst, he must have concluded to attack that stronghold on the way. He was consequently greatly alarmed; the more so on his daughter's account than

his own. He knew Prince Steffel's force to be larger than any which could be opposed to him, even with the possible contingent of Waldhorst, and the friendly castles in the neighborhood of Falkenstein combined.

He began to blame himself for not having kept a watch on the vindictive Pomeranian. How far he was right in his conjectures will be shown in our next chapter.

CHAPTER XIV.

WAR.

"O that we now had here
But one ten thousand of those men in England,
That do not work today."

—*Shaks. Henry V.*

Within the courtyard of Waldhorst stood Duke Henry, Conrad and young Hugo, the new lord of the castle, in anxious consultation.

Two messengers of those sent out half an hour before had just returned, their horses covered with foam, and reported the woods and valley alive with Pomeranian knights and hirelings, and that tents were being pitched within a short distance of Waldhorst, on the right bank of the river. The third messenger did not return, having in all probability been captured and put to the sword by the ruthless invaders.

As our friends reviewed the situation, another bearer of evil tidings arrived, in the person of a monk from the Benedictine Monastery, who had been sent by the Abbot to inform the inmates of Waldhorst of the approach of Prince Steffel, in person, to within a stone's

throw of the ferry landing across the river, after having destroyed everything on his way. The monk also stated that another Benedictine brother had been dispatched to warn Ursula to be on the lookout, and prepare to assist those from Waldhorst Castle who might attempt to reach her on the receipt of the alarming news.

Duke Henry instructed the young monk to return with all haste to the monastery, and to dispatch another messenger to the Princess with the information that they would start from Waldhorst before daylight, expecting to get as far as the ruins of Grunau Castle the succeeding night, where he hoped his own men from Falkenstein would join them.

Affairs were in such a condition at the castle that they found it impossible to make an earlier start. Moreover, they reasoned that the Pomeranian army, while preparing to encamp for the night beside the river, would in all likelihood not attempt to cross it that day; and the early morning hours seemed to them devoid of danger.

They were, however, in fear of an attack on Waldhorst at any moment; so all hands were put to work in strengthening the fortifications. With the aid of the principal safeguard of the castle, its broad and deep moat, Hugo thought he would be able to defend it successfully against any ordinary attack, despite the

reduced number of his retainers, so as to hold out until aid should arrive from Falkenstein.

At daylight the Duke and Conrad started on their march with their own small retinue and a contingent from Waldhorst, in all about eighty foot and thirty mounted retainers. On leaving they embraced Hugo and Volga, the latter having insisted on remaining and sharing whatever danger might be in store for them.

By this time the Abbot's first messenger had reached the fortress of Falkenstein and his tidings produced the greatest consternation. The high-spirited Princess, instantly realizing the danger in which her father and lover were placed, mounted Saladin, and accompanied by Kurt, galloped to Bernard von Wolfram's castle to seek from him assistance and advice. As she rode at full speed on her noble steed, with eyes aflame and hair streaming in the breeze, the beautiful woman stirred the hearts and minds of the dull peasantry, who long remembered the unusual sight. Later in the day she returned with Wolfram at her side, followed by a small detachment of well-disciplined men, the minstrel's contribution to the select and noble little band which marched that night to the relief of the lord of Falkenstein.

Wolfram was appointed commander by Ursula. It was as much as he could do to prevent that brave and intrepid woman from personally joining the expedi-

tion. Only after explaining the necessity of someone in authority remaining at the castle in the event of an attack, did she relent, and agreed to take charge of her small garrison of about a hundred men all told. Wolfram had with him about three hundred men, including many brave and devoted knights.

Just before they reached the ruins of Grunau next morning they met the second Benedictine messenger. From him they learned the purport of the Duke's message to Ursula. It was, as we know, that they would start from Waldhorst at the early dawn of that very day. "In time for us to meet them half way," said Knight Wolfram: "Go and deliver your message, holy brother and tell the Princess that you left us in good spirits and ready to annihilate any Pomeranian dogs who may attempt to intercept the Duke."

But alas for the uncertainity of all human calculations! Before another day had passed Wolfram appeared before the fortress of Falkenstein, his much reduced little band disputing every foot of ground with his enemies, who outnumbered them three to one. Prince Steffel cursed his knights for not crushing the little band outright. He himself had done immense execution among the devoted few, and more than once had tried to meet Wolfram face to face; but that shrewd though valiant captain knew better than to risk the

fortunes of his men on the chances of a single and unequal combat.

Ursula saw the diminished, hard pressed line of her faithful retainers, as they drew near the fortress. Summoning her garrison, and placing herself at its head, she made a sortie which took the enemy unawares, causing them to waver. In vain did Prince Steffel, cursing terribly, ride out in front of his knights and urge them to follow him. The remnant of the little band succeeded in reaching the lower castle gate and was safe. The gallant Wolfram, however, with a few followers, rallied to the side of the brave Princess, until she and her men were also safe within the confines of the fortress. The iron gate half way up the hill was closed in the very face of the enraged Prince, who had just ridden forward alone to secure his prey. The disappointed warrior, having been thus foiled, determined to lay siege to the great stronghold, which was defended by the bold woman who had refused him her hand; so he encamped at its base in the beautiful valley surrounding it.

The splendid fortress of Falkenstein, however, at the time of our story, was considered impregnable. Prince Steffel, after two ineffectual efforts to take it by storm, gave up all idea of capturing it. He vented his fury and disappointment, instead, on the surrounding country, laying waste the lands, and ran-

sacking or destroying many of the minor strongholds. Among the latter was the beautiful little castle of Bernard von Wolfram, which was easily taken during the absence of its owner.

Having thus left his evil mark on the beautiful principality, Prince Steffel withdrew his forces, returned to the river, and marched directly on Waldhorst.

The enemy having disappeared, Ursula sent at once to some distant barons who had been spared by the Pomeranian Prince, imploring their assistance. She applied also for succor to the still powerful though blind, Markgraf of Luxemburg, whose daughter, a great friend of Ursula, had taken the reins of government into her own hands, but was somewhat unfortunately then engaged, with all her available forces, in a strife with some powerful barons who had refused to recognize her father's authority.

This brave ally could, therefore, only promise that as soon as her own troubles were ended she would send her retainers to Ursula's aid, and enter with all her heart into the warfare with the Pomeranian invader.

As the season was already far advanced, the probability of this assistance reaching her before the spring were very slight. Ursula decided, therefore, to gather together what she could, for another attempt to re-

lieve those so dear to her. Two days after the repulse of Captain Wolfram, she had learned that her father and Conrad were besieged at Waldhorst Castle, though how they happened to remain there, or to return thither after having left it, she could not comprehend.

On that eventful morning when the Duke and Conrad set out from Waldhorst at early dawn with their small bands of retainers, they crossed the secret ford in safety, keeping to byways, in order to avoid the lurking foe; nor did they encounter any of them until the same hour that Prince Steffel first intercepted Wolfram. Half way to the monastery, they were suddenly confronted by a detachment of two hundred Pomeranian knights and followers, and another unequal and desperate fight ensued.

The Duke's footmen with their lances presented an impenetrable barrier; while Conrad protected the flanks with his mounted lanzknechts, and did great deeds of personal valor.

For a while the enemy was kept at bay and finally thrown into confusion. Our friends might have taken advantage of this by quickly advancing, and attacking the rear of Prince Steffel's forces as they pursued Wolfram, had not another, though smaller, detachment come to the assistance of the enemy. This force, having witnessed from the opposite bank of the river

the gallant resistance of Duke Henry and Conrad, and subsequent discomfiture of their comrades, plunged in, and swam their horses over, with the intention of falling on their rear. The Duke's forces wheeled to meet them as they emerged from the water, and made considerable havoc amongst them. The first detachment of Pomeranians, seeing this timely assistance at hand, rallied and renewed the attack. Hemmed in on both sides the brave little band were compelled to cut their way back to Waldhorst, losing a great many men in doing so. Conrad had been wounded twice. The Duke felt sorely bruised, having had two horses killed under him. The remnant of their forces finally reached the secret ford. This they crossed in safety, while the enemy, being unacquainted with it, lost their footing in the attempt, many of them being swept down the stream and drowned. They were thus obliged to abandon further pursuit.

Leaving a strong guard to watch this crossing, the Pomeranians marched with all haste to join the forces besieging Waldhorst, hoping that before their arrival the garrison would fall into the hands of the besiegers.

The Duke and Conrad, after crossing the river with but fifteen mounted and barely fifty footsore lanzknechts, all that remained of the gallant little band, felt more than anxious to avoid any further meeting

with the enemy. They therefore approached Waldhorst stealthily, although still ignorant of the fact that siege had actually been laid to the castle. No sooner had they entered the woods, however, than they saw tents and campfires, with soldiers sitting round about them. Some of them were still engaged in cooking their evening meal, and the savory smell which arose reminded the poor fellows that they had done an entire day's fighting without a morsel of food.

What was to be done now? With deliverance apparently so near, would they, in their famished and exhausted condition, again be compelled to fight against tremendous odds?

They moved forward slowly and noiselessly until they reached a point whence, through openings between the trees, the towers and raised drawbridge of Waldhorst could be seen. Here they halted, while Conrad wistfully surveyed the high, irregular fortifications of the castle. As his eyes roamed from one point to another, he suddenly descried a young girl seated at a window in one of the farthest towers and busily engaged in some special work. She was at so great a distance that the knight could scarcely distinguish her features, but on calling the Duke's attention to her, they thought they recognized her as Volga. It was then that an idea occurred to Duke Henry, which being immediately acted upon, proved

the salvation of the brave little band, by almost a miracle.

He recalled a peculiar signal of distress, known only to himself, the late Count Hans, Hugo and Volga, which they had always used in the chase; and he felt sure that should it reach the ears of the young girl, even from so great a distance, she would comprehend its meaning. Taking from his pocket a whistle, he gave its loud, shrill note twice in quick succession. A sentinel, not thirty yards off, started, halted and peered into the dense shadows of the woods. Discovering nothing and thinking he had heard the shrill note of some forest bird, he resumed his beat.

The form at the window, as they had rightly surmised was Volga, who was making bandages for the wounded by the fast waning light.

She sprang up at the familiar signal, and looked inquiringly toward the wood whence it seemed to come.

By the last rays of the disappearing sun, she perceived in the shadow of the trees, someone waving his mailed hand, and the truth flashed upon her. Making a quick responsive motion, to the great joy and relief of the anxious friends, she left the window, and hurrying with all speed down tortuous stairways to the courtyard, found Hugo. To him she communicated what she had heard and seen. The young Count of Waldhorst lost no time in deciding upon a strategic

ruse which might secure to any of his friends in distress admittance into the castle.

On the lookout from their hiding-place for some sign of coming assistance, Conrad and the Duke suddenly descried a figure, flag in hand, on the slowly descending drawbridge. As it stopped half way in its descent, they recognized Hugo, waving the red and white ensign of Waldhorst toward their hiding-place.

The two sentinels stationed at the moat at first imagined that the bearer of the flag desired an interview with some knight in command in order to make terms for the surrender of the castle. When, however, the bridge stopped half way, and they saw it was *not* the snow white flag of truce, they fiercely shouted to Hugo to explain the purpose. Receiving no answer, they were about to report to their chief the singular actions of the flag-bearer, when a great shout burst upon their ears and resounded throughout the camp.

It came from the throats of some sixty, thirsty, hungry and weary lanzknechts, who, headed by the Duke, with Conrad bringing up the rear, were making for the drawbridge on a full run. The wooden structure was quickly lowered by willing hands to meet them. The Duke with his foremost men reached it before the Pomeranians were sufficiently recovered from their astonishment to make a move. The camp,



Conrad and the Duke suddenly descried a figure, flag in hand, on the slowly descending drawbridge.



however, was in an uproar. A body of men armed with pikes, succeeded in gaining the bridge just as Conrad, with a chosen few, confronted them. The stalwart knight cut down three of the foremost of the enemy with his battle-axe, which, in the absence of his father's trusty blade, he used that day. Keeping the rest at bay until the last of his men had gained the courtyard, he stepped backward, shouting the command to raise the bridge.

At that moment an immensely tall, unarmed Pomeranian sprang to his side, grappling with him at such close quarters that it was impossible for Conrad to use his weapon. As the bridge rose higher and higher the two antagonists fell backward, rolling over and over each other until they reached the courtyard.

There Conrad, with the assistance of his friends, would have made short work with the big fellow who had taken him unawares; but, to the great amazement of the bystanders, who had watched this novel encounter with interest, just as Conrad raised his battle-axe the long-legged miscreant fell on his knees, begging for mercy. "I only grappled with you, Sir Knight," he said, "because I wanted to get away from that camp. I could think of no better way than boarding the drawbridge while in motion, and taking hold of you, noble sir, in order to prevent your splitting my head and throwing me into the moat."

"Didst thou then mean to desert Prince Steffel?" asked Conrad, suppressing a strong inclination to laugh.

"'I did, Sir Knight," replied the man. "That brute compelled me, as he did many others, to enlist at the point of the sword. They are all afraid of him, good sir, and remain in his service from fear alone. He gives them plenty of beer and promises them generous wages after taking this castle."

"Thou art almost as large as he is," said Conrad, much amused. "What is thy name?"

"My name is Peter Longshanks," replied the man. "I am quite as large as the Prince, and some day I hope to measure myself with him, as I did with your lordship, begging your pardon."

"Well then, Peter," interposed Hugo, "thou may'st remain with us; but mind that thou dost not play us false, else thy last hour, which but just now was close at hand, will most surely strike."

At his own request he was put to work, cleaning the courtyard and stables. Though he seemed to do his task thoroughly and with a will, the young master of Waldhorst put a watch on him most of the time, as he feared to trust him too implicitly.

What was left of the small band was once more safe within the walls of the fortress; but at roll call many were found to be wounded, and a still larger

number were missing. Volga's bandages came into use sooner than she expected, Conrad being the first one to need them. His wounds she dressed with her own hands. He felt well enough to be present, when, late in the evening, after all had been cared for, such of them as were able to sat down in the banquet hall to a well-earned repast. Of the missing faces many would never again be seen at any gathering; the women of the household mourned the loss of husbands, brothers or sons.

It was a sad ending to the hopeful beginning of that day. Great fears were expressed for the safety of the small party which they felt assured the Princess Ursula had sent to their aid.

No one could foretell the outcome of this savage war, thus suddenly sprung upon them, and which they must carry on against vastly superior numbers.

The Duke was deeply anxious on account of his beloved wife and daughter. Conrad's thoughts of his betrothed were mingled with sad forebodings.

CHAPTER XV.

KURT'S ADVENTURE.

"This work requires long time, dissembling looks,
Commixt with undermining actions,
Watching advantages to execute.
Our foes are mighty and their number great;
It therefore follows that our stratagems
Must branch forth into manifold deceits,
Endless devices, bottomless conclusions."

—*Chapman's Alphonsus.*

At the Fortress of Falkenstein the days which followed were sad ones, indeed, for the Princess, her mother, and Wolfram.

As week succeeded week without tidings, save the vague rumor that Duke Henry and Conrad, both disabled and wounded, had been driven back within the walls of Waldhorst, Ursula became almost frantic. Knowing that it would be folly to risk another battle in hope of relieving them with a force inferior to that which had already sustained defeat, she finally decided with what assistance she could obtain to make an attempt to reach Waldhorst in secret.

Kurt, at his own request, went on several expeditions necessary to this end, his swift Hungarian horse carrying him safely through all dangers.

By the end of six weeks, about the beginning of winter, the knights and squires who had been gathered together by the indefatigable Princess, amounting in all to about five hundred men, were quartered in and around Falkenstein. Determined to steal a march on Prince Steffel, she planned to attack that part of his army which was encamped about Waldhorst, before meeting him in open field; thus avoiding another battle without the co-operation of her father and Conrad. In this venture, she took command in person, relying, however, on the advice of Wolfram, whom she kept at her side.

Having expressed a desire to apprise the inmates of Waldhorst of her intended move for their relief, Kurt volunteered his services, saying that he believed he could approach the fortress at dark, and, unperceived by the enemy, drop into the moat, to be fished out by his friends at the castle.

Ursula endeavored to dissuade the brave boy from so perilous an undertaking, but he begged and persisted, telling her that he felt sure of reaching the castle; and protested that should he be captured, he would not, even under penalty of death, impart the least information to her enemies.

As the Princess knew the importance of keeping Prince Steffel in ignorance of her intended move, and felt sure that she could rely implicitly on her faithful attendant, she finally agreed to let him go, sending by him a verbal message to her father and Conrad, which would inform them of her purpose to bring them relief. She little knew that spies had already apprised Prince Steffel of her intended movement.

To understand fully the nature of the events which followed, it will be necessary for us to accompany the brave boy on his adventures.

Starting on a cold wintery morn, Kurt, in passing through the desolate country, laid waste by Prince Steffel, noticed here and there newly ploughed fields and farmhouses with smoking chimneys. He rode rapidly until he entered the woods, which gave him protection from the piercing wind. There he allowed his horse to proceed at an easier gait. He rested that night under a blanket which covered both man and beast, on a hillside not far from the dilapidated ruins of Grunau. The buildings themselves he avoided, not on account of the prevailing superstition, but from fear that some of the Pomeranians might be quartered there. After feeding his horse with a large loaf of bread, and breakfasting himself on a smaller one, he proceeded on his way. The country grew so wild that, for a time, he was obliged to keep to the open road.

Dressed in his plain woolen suit, no one noticed him, however. He re-entered the byways of the protecting woods, and after another rest and a frugal midday meal, reached, late in the afternoon, a wide bridle path diverging from the river, by which, from the description given him, he knew he could reach Waldhorst Castle in about an hour by way of the public ford.

No one was in sight. As it was near dusk, the boy imagined that, at so late an hour, the enemy would most likely be in camp; or, in case he were to meet any of them, he would again be allowed to pass unmolested. Everything seemed clear as far as the eye could reach. With an unwarranted sense of security, he gave his little horse loose rein, putting him into a gallop. But alas! at a sudden turn in the road he came, full tilt, upon a detachment of horsemen on their way to join Prince Steffel.

Kurt had been riding so rapidly and had come upon this force so unexpectedly, he was almost unhorsed by his sudden halt. His dismay may be imagined on recognizing the enemy. Unable at so short notice to invent some satisfactory account of himself, he was suspected and made prisoner.

They tied his hands behind him, and led the poor, faithful boy back the way be came. At the end of a long, cold ride, they arrived at the Pomeranian camp after midnight, just as the cheerless, waning moon

rose behind the hills. He was forthwith brought before Prince Steffel. The drowsy giant hardly noticed his young prisoner, but when he learned that he persistently refused to give an account of himself, he ordered him to be bound hand and foot and cast into a neighboring pigsty to die.

Kurt's faithful steed was given to a young lanzknecht who had enlisted that day, and had his quarters in a rickety shed adjoining the pen.

As he lay there perfectly helpless, the poor lad begged his young guard for a drink of water from a well near by, but received, instead, a kick, followed by a brutal laugh, as the heartless fellow re-entered the shed.

The ropes which bound our young courier were drawn so tightly as to stop circulation. His hands and feet became painfully swollen; moreover, his filthy quarters had only been vacated that day by their unsavory inmates, and were almost unbearable on account of their stench.

Kurt thought of his adored mistress. Tears came into his eyes as he remembered how she had warned him. As he became cold and dizzy he felt that there was some consolation, however, in dying in her cause. Believing that his last hour had come, he commended his soul to God. The pale moon danced before his eyes; he closed them and became unconscious.

The tipsy hireling had meanwhile doffed his outer clothing, and hanging his hilted knife, a half sword then used by the common men-at-arms, on a nail near the door, had thrown himself on the floor beside his newly acquired and restless steed. As he fell into a deep, drunken sleep, the intelligent animal nosed him, and finding not his master, neighed impatiently. The familiar sound fell upon Kurt's ear, partly restoring him to consciousness. There being only a frail partition between them, he heard the faithful beast moving in his stall and the heavy breathing of the sleeping recruit. His mind became clearer. A desire to make a fight for life took possession of him. Rolling over and over sideways and against the shed, he secured a sitting position, and succeeded, by gradually working his back upwards along the creaking boards, in obtaining a standing one. In spite of his still desperate condition he gained courage. Balancing himself on his fettered feet, he managed to shuffle along, little by little, until he rounded the shed.

As he looked within he saw by the moonlight the glittering blade suspended on the wall. This decided him further. Eagerly groping his way to this much coveted prize, and taking it firmly between his teeth, he made his laborious way out again. The first object that his eyes rested on was the well, quite near, but far from him in his crippled condition.

Moving painfully and slowly as before, he came close enough to discover on its ledge a leaky bucket from which drops of water were oozing. He was nearly frantic with thirst. In his anxiety to reach it, he fell, knocking his head violently against the well. The weapon dropped from between his teeth, with its point sticking against the side of the wooden structure. Instantly a mode of freeing himself suggested itself to the poor lad. While still on his knees he managed, with his teeth, to secure the blade in a crevice in the boards, its hilt wedged against a stone in the grass. Then throwing himself down at full length, he lifted his bound feet, and cautiously placing his heels down on either side of it, he brought the rope in contact with its sharp edge. After moving his swollen limbs up and down for what seemed an interminable length of time, he finally succeeded, to his great joy, in severing the cord. He managed, as the circulation of his limbs returned, to stand upright for a few moments. Almost immediately, however, he got down again and with feverish haste endeavored to use the same device in extricating his hands. This proved a more difficult task. Panting, and perspiring, notwithstanding the cold night, and parched with thirst, his brain seemed nearly on fire, as he kept on pressing his body back against the blade. At length, he succeeded in freeing his hands also, not, however, without having cut them in several places.

With wild joy he siezed the bucket. Filling it with mad speed, he nearly spilled half its contents in his eagerness before it reached his lips. He drew a deep sigh of relief as he satisfied his thirst. His first thought was thankfulness to God that he had been enabled to extricate himself from so dreadful a plight. The reaction then came. Sitting shivering in the cold wind, he soon became aware that more was to be done, and that speedily. Grasping the weapon he re-entered the shed. There in the moonshine lay the sleeping young lanzknecht. Kurt's heart misgave him for a moment as he stood with that short blade poised at his unconscious victim's side. His horse neighed. Fearing that the sound might awake the sleeper, it decided him.

Drawing it across the throat of the young soldier, he unconsciously used so much nervous force as nearly to sever the head from the body. The sight of the first blood he had ever spilt sickened him. He shuddered. Dropping the blade, which thus far had served him so well, he rushed to the side of his little horse, which gave another impatient neigh and turned his head toward him. He placed his arm around him, speaking to him aloud. The sound of his voice reassured him. As he looked upon the dawning day, the thought of his beloved mistress, Ursula, whom he might live to see again, fully restored his courage.

He wiped the bloody weapon, pulled off his outer garments, took down from the wall those of the dead man and found to his joy that they fitted him exactly. Noticing that the Pomeranian's face somewhat resembled his own, Kurt hoped, thus attired, to pass for the young soldier among his comrades, possibly as yet but half recovered from the night's debauch.

Throwing the dead body, together with his own cast-off clothing into the pigsty, he washed his blood-stained hands at the well and returned to the shed. Then disposing of the straw in such a manner that no trace of blood might be visible, he saddled his horse.

Hardly had he done this when he was startled by the sound of a bugle. Looking about, he noticed in the distance a number of men seated before a roaring fire, enjoying their breakfast. Hunger and cold decided him to make a bold move. He approached the Pomeranian hirelings and asked for a bite. They carelessly eyed the boy and made room for him good-naturedly. One of them asked him if he were not the young recruit who had enlisted the night before. Trembling within, he answered in the affirmative; and in order to avoid further questioning, inquired if there was to be any fighting that day.

"Indeed, yes, my boy," replied one of the men; "we are under orders to intercept the Princess of Falkenstein on her way to Waldhorst Castle."

Kurt, horror-struck, was unable to speak; and thinking of his dear mistress, whose movements he had believed to be secret, and for whose sake he had come near sacrificing his life the night before, he grew pale, and his eyes filled with tears.

The dull fellows looked at him half amazed and half compassionately, thinking that he shrank from the thought of his first battle. Presently they spoke to him reassuringly, telling him that in all probability he would be placed in the rear as an attendant to one of the knights.

A few moments later the bugle sounded, To arms! The lanzknechts mounted and fell into line. As the boy, elated with the success of his masquerade, in a spirit of bravado rode boldly along their entire length, the attention of everyone was attracted by his fine horse, as well as by his graceful figure and splendid horsemanship. Among those most interested was Prince Steffel himself, who had just come upon the scene, mounted on an immense white charger. He summoned the youthful rider to his side.

Poor Kurt's heart sank within him. He naturally thought all was lost, and that fortune, which had so far smiled upon his efforts to escape, was now about to desert him. At the Prince's abrupt question: "Where didst thou learn to ride so well?" he was somewhat reassured, answering with readiness, though hardly

knowing what he said: "I was brought up on horseback, please your Highness, and for that reason I joined your mounted men."

"Oh, is that so?" said the Prince. "I thought thou hadst been pulled in by force. Be that as it may," he continued, much to the relief of the frightened boy, "as thou bearest thyself so well on horseback, I will make thee my sword-bearer, and also give my led horse into thy charge during the coming fray. Mind thou dost thy duty," he added. "Follow me!"

Kurt, whose fears were quieted by the manner of the Prince, felt his blood grow hot with hatred toward him, and he was seized with a desire to dispose of this arch-enemy of his mistress by the same method he had used with the young hireling whom he was now impersonating.

His first taste of real warfare had engendered a thirst for blood, far from natural to the youthful henchman of Ursula. Her danger but heightened this warlike disposition, and he resolved that before the day was over he would, indeed, "do his duty" toward Prince Steffel, but in a manner little expected by that valiant commander.

How far this resolution was carried out will be revealed in the next chapter.

CHAPTER XVI.

HOW KURT SERVED PRINCE STEFFEL.

"I follow him to serve my turn upon him;
We cannot be all masters, nor all masters
Cannot be truly followed."

—*Shaks. Othello.*

As we are already aware, the Pomeranian Prince had been informed of Ursula's projected movements. He had thrown the main body of his forces to the left bank of the river, while maintaining constant communication with the besiegers of Waldhorst. He was thus prepared to intercept and give battle to the Princess at almost any point. As a consequence, that brave woman, with her gallant knights and followers, had hardly left the ruins of Grunau in the early morning, and entered the back road to Waldhorst, when she was confronted by the enemy's advance guard, disputing the way. Not knowing the extent of the force opposed to her, she steadily advanced, driving them back toward the river,

where, to her surprise and disappointment, she suddenly encountered the main body of the Pomeranian knights. Nothing was left for her to do but to give battle to this formidable array, which far outnumbered her own force. For a long time it looked as though the inspiring example of the Princess and Knight Wolfram would gain the day, and that they would be enabled to continue their march to Waldhorst. But when Prince Steffel, rousing from one of his lazy fits, came to the front and saw Ursula on her beautiful Saladin, surrounded by a host of gallant knights, and his own knights, squires and vassals wavering before their impetuous onslaughts, he placed himself at the head of his mounted lanzknechts, with Kurt close at his heels, and made a furious attack on his opponent's flank.

A desperate hand to hand fight ensued, lasting fully an hour. By that time Ursula had lost nearly one-half of her little army, but she had inflicted a correspondingly heavy loss on the superior force opposed to her, and still held her ground.

Brave Knight Wolfram had slain with his own hand many an adversary, and though wounded, remained at the front, while keeping as usual out of Prince Steffel's reach. The irate commander, however, was now seen cutting his way toward him. Ursula saw his intention and prayed for her knight's de-



The Prince's horse reared violently as a knife thrust penetrated its vitals.



liverance. Wolfram, finding that he could no longer evade him, prepared to meet the onset. Bracing himself in his saddle he raised his strong sword, together with his shield, to ward off the expected blows, and to retaliate upon his dangerous foe. The giant bore down upon him on his immense charger, but, by some subtle intervention, the blow which he had dealt with tremendous force fell short, though splitting his opponent's shield in its descent. The Prince's horse reared violently as a knife thrust penetrated its vitals. Pawing the air for a moment, he fell backward, crushing to earth under its ponderous weight the massive bulk of its burly rider.

Wolfram was saved. During the confusion subsequent upon the great leader's fall, he was enabled to rally his scattered forces in order to resist any new attack which might be made.

The Prince, half stunned and badly bruised, was extricated with great difficulty from beneath his dead horse. Hardly able to stand, he called for his led horse.

Neither the animal nor Kurt could be found, though both had been seen a few minutes before close at hand. Search being fruitless, the Prince, feeling woefully shaken by his mishap, ordered his knights t continue the fight, and rode to the rear on the horse of one of his retainers.

The Princess and Wolfram, meanwhile, had held a short conference, and concluded that it would be most advisable, in their crippled condition, to begin an orderly retreat on Falkenstein. Though again foiled in her attempt to relieve her friends at Waldhorst, Ursula was none the less thankful when, two days later, she reached her castle, bringing back with her her gallant wounded commander and one-half of her brave followers. After seeing the wounded cared for, with a forced expression of cheerfulness she withdrew. Finding her mother, she threw herself into her loving arms, weeping bitterly.

"All seems lost, darling mother," she cried. "My father and Conrad are still prisoners at Waldhorst, and a large and victorious army, which has already reduced every stronghold in this and the adjoining valleys, threatens to destroy that fortress also. Winter is at hand and it would be useless, now, to make any further attempt at relief or rescue. We must wait till spring, and then, God willing, the assistance promised by our brave ally of Luxemburg will arrive. Will it be possible for those we love to hold out till then? I doubt it! All that we can do, dear mother, is to pray to God that they may be preserved from harm and restored to us."

"Thou hast found the true consolation in thy troubles, my darling daughter," said the Duchess; "let

us trust in God and in his own good time He may see fit to reunite us."

After thus communing with each other, these two noble women felt calmer and more resigned to fate, though each succeeding day proved the more trying to both mother and daughter.

Where was Kurt? Not even had he returned. Not only were they in suspense as to the fate of the beloved ones besieged at Waldhorst, but also on account of the brave boy who had set out to join them, fearing that he had met some untoward accident.

Wolfram's wounds required constant care, and as his own castle had been rendered uninhabitable by the Prince's marauders, he was quartered in one of the most luxurious bedrooms at Falkenstein, where Ursula was indefatigable in her attentions to his comfort. One can well imagine that her adoring knight and minstrel could recover more rapidly than he would have done under less agreeable circumstances.

The inmates of the fortress of Waldhorst were, however, not without tidings from the Princess. On the night following the battle, Hugo, Volga and Conrad were, as usual, exercising their horses in the courtyard, when suddenly the latter, happening to be near the moat, heard a splash and immediately afterward a voice calling for help.

It was Kurt, whom his master, with wonder and de-

light, recognized even in the darkness. The young adventurer was speedily rescued from the icy water, in a half frozen condition, and a few moments later found himself in a snug bedroom, thawing between warm blankets, with Conrad and Duke Henry standing at his bedside. Volga, who gave him a warm drink, sat down near Hugo at the other end of the room.

Kurt, poor fellow, was at first unable to articulate a word between his chattering teeth, but he soon recovered sufficiently to deliver to his kind and anxious friends the purport of the many messages he had brought to them from Falkenstein. As soon, however, as he began to describe his capture, and the battle in which he had so singularly participated, he became feverish and so much confused in his recital, that the Duke, after having learned by a few direct questions that Ursula and Wolfram had in all probability retreated safely to Falkenstein, advised the boy to be quiet and sleep if possible, postponing the details of his narrative to another day.

They were greatly distressed to learn of Ursula's failure in her second attempt to aid them. But, as they had gathered from Kurt's answers that assistance from the Markgraf of Luxemburg would reach them in the spring, they decided to defend Waldhorst to the last, and took immediate measures to economize the pro-

visions to make it surely possible to hold out through the winter.

On the day following, the poor boy was in a high state of fever, bordering on delirium, and remained so for nearly a week. At last one morning he regaled his interested listeners with the story of his adventures, concluding thus: "I accompanied the big Prince to the battlefield as his sword-bearer, and led his gigantic brown horse. We remained for a considerable time in the rear, while the conflict was raging, and I kept close to the side of my new master, revolving in my mind the while what I might do, even at the risk of my life, to serve him as he deserved and prevent his doing any further harm to anybody.

"A little later, as he rode forward and attacked the Princess Ursula and her knights in the flank, I had hard work even to keep up with him, impeded as I was by the led horse. When at last I saw him dealing death around, and cutting his way toward Knight Wolfram, I abandoned the big steed, and on my Hungarian, managed to keep close at his heels. I was desperately anxious to circumvent him before he could reach our brave leader, but was unable to do so until the last moment. Quickly dismounting, I threw myself in front of his horse, and as the Prince raised his powerful arm to deal the knight a death blow, I ran my small sword into his poor steed's heart. The

big animal reared and fell backward upon his master, crushing him under his dead body. Brave Knight Wolfram was safe! I saw no more, but amid the confusion which followed I succeeded in regaining my little horse undiscovered. Remounting, I made my way to the rear. There the Pomeranians sought to detain me, doubtless deeming me a deserter; but calling out to them that the Prince had despatched me to Waldhorst, I struck the road in that direction and gained the woods before anyone could overtake me. From a hill I saw in the distance the Princess retreating unpursued. At a small clearing, not far from the upper ford, where a sparkling spring keeps the late grass alive, I abandoned my poor horse. I wonder if he is still there; or having wandered in search of me, has been captured." Tears suffused the eyes of the boy as he thus spoke of his faithful steed. "Later on," he concluded, "I made my way on foot, unmolested, through the enemy's camp, and dropped into the moat, out of which, kind sirs, you fished me, half dead."

Our friends were highly delighted with the boy's recital and greatly praised him for his courage and devotion to the Princess. Most particularly did they laud him for his valiant deed at the last critical moment.

While they still conversed with the gratified lad, they were startled by the sudden entrance of Peter

Longshanks, well-nigh breathless, who announced that the enemy led by Prince Steffel in person, were preparing for an assault on the castle. The Prince, having recovered from his fall, had just returned to camp, and he had been heard to deciare in a loud voice his determination to destroy the castle and all its inmates on that day.

Valiant Peter, the deserter, for his many brave deeds in defending Waldhorst against former attacks, had become, by that time, a trusted member of the garrison, and that day was placed on the principal lookout.

The castle, greatly strengthened since the last of these onslaughts, now became a scene of commotion. On came the Pomeranian knights backed by their vassals, throwing immense logs across the moat, and placing on top of them scaling ladders, which they endeavored to raise against the solid walls of the ramparts. At each attempt they were hurled back, killed or wounded, many of the latter finding watery graves in the treacherous ditch.

At a point near the drawbridge, Prince Steffel unexpectedly succeeded in throwing across the moat two great logs alongside of each other, forming a temporary solid bridge. As he and several knights advanced quickly upon this structure, it looked as though they might gain the battlements around the

outer courtyard. Just here, however, the brave Peter happened for the moment to be stationed alone, with instructions to give the alarm at the first approach of danger. The uproar around the castle assured him that a general assault was taking place. Fearing that all might be lost should he leave his post for a moment, he decided to confront the hated Prince alone, even though his life might be sacrificed.

Quickly realizing, however, that he would have more than that one detested adversary to encounter, it occurred to him that the joint advance of the knights might be checked by strategy, and their reaching the courtyard be prevented.

Using his prodigious strength he sought to lift and displace the larger log, but in vain. In a similar attempt on the other he was more successful; and throwing its end over into the moat, he caused the occupants of both to lose their footing, following the log into the turbulent waters, with the exception of the Prince. That giant, in advance of the others, with a tremendous bound, gained the battlements. Before the brave Peter had realized what had happened his helmet and head were both cleft by a fearful blow from his arch enemy. Feeling that it must be fatal, he sprang upon his adversary. Encircling his huge bulk in a death struggle, he, by a dexterous move, threw him close to the edge of the wall, falling over backward with him into the deep water.

The one idea which nerved the dying Peter was to drag under and drown his burly foe, but his strength was too far spent; so after one or two futile attempts, he loosened his hold and the waters closed over his lifeless body. Prince Steffel's vassals rushed to their leader's rescue, and despite his heavy armor, succeeded in drawing him, half drowned, from the moat.

Having been repulsed on all sides, the enemy abandoned all further attempts to capture the fortress by storm. Conrad and Hugo, who had reached the outer battlements round the courtyard in time to witness the Prince's rescue, now threw over the remaining log. The castle was once more, for the time being, secure in its defense.

That evening our brave friends sat before a roaring fire in the banquet room, listening to Volga's account of the struggle between the wrestler and Prince Steffel, which she witnessed from an inner window, while with the women of the castle, preparing the scanty meal which was then placed before the hungry garrison. The single glass of wine which was allowed to each one that night was drunk in silence in memory of the valiant Peter.

Kurt's condition prevented his active participation in the events of the day, and it was fully a week before he was pronounced strong enough to venture upon a return to Falkenstein. Dur-

ing his late perilous expedition, he had become so well acquainted with the woods and byways, that he felt confident of reaching the Princess in safety.

On a dark night, under a threatening sky, he left the castle, bearing with him some important instructions and many messages of love from the Duke and Conrad.

Clad once more as a Pomeranian rider, Kurt noiselessly crossed the moat in a boat, landing just between two sentinels. There he lay safe for a few moments under cover of the darkness. Not daring to rise, he rolled himself slowly over and over until his progress was arrested by the trunk of a tree, near which, by the dying embers of a campfire, a tent was faintly visible. Here the real danger of discovery began. He had, however, but a few weeks before, passed safely through the camp, and he picked his way that night more cautiously than ever. After passing many tents and smoldering camp-fires, he found himself at a wooden enclosure in which the horses were quartered. Instantly his thoughts returned to his lost steed. He wondered if it were possible that the little Hungarian might be there. Without any especial reason for thinking it, the idea took possession of him, and he resolved to act upon it.

Leaning upon the wooden fence to await the daylight, well aware that it would bring with it new dan-

ger, he was willing to take the risk, believing that his uniform would again shield him from identification.

A faint gleam of day soon enabled him to make out the outline of the animals. As it fully broke, he discovered, to his great joy, that, sure enough, his faithful friend, given up by him for lost, was there amongst them. With the hope of recapturing him Kurt at once resolved to remain where he was and brave the consequences.

While thinking over a plan to carry out his designs, the morning bugle sounded. Immediately the whole camp was astir. A moment later, two stalwart Pomeranians, one of them limping, emerged from a shed near by and were about entering the enclosure, when they perceived him. The lame one called out gruffly: "What dost thou want here, thou fellow?"

"I came to help with the horses," replied the boy, boldly.

"Who told thee to come?" was the rejoinder.

"Prince Steffel," answered Kurt.

"It is a lie!" retorted the man. "Prince Steffel left the camp four days ago."

"I know it," said the young dissembler, still keeping a bold front. "I did not say he had told me today. Our Captain has kept me in his tent doing his dirty work until this morning."

"We'll see about that," replied the trooper; "but

now go to work and help my mate while I nurse my sore leg. Mind now, and be quick about it."

Kurt needed no further admonition, but went to work with a will, keeping, however, as far away from his own horse as possible.

Hardly had he and the unsuspecting trooper entered the enclosure than the little Hungarian, catching sight of his young master, neighed cheerily, at the same time sending his heels in air in joyful play. This startled the boy, but he kept a sober face, attending assiduously to the horses under his care. When they reached the river, every one of the thirsty animals proceeded to drink except the Hungarian, which, standing foot deep in the water, turned his head wistfully toward his watchful master.

This was too much for the excited boy. No longer able to contain himself, and thinking that perhaps this was the most favorable opportunity he might have for escape, he ran to his horse, vaulted on its bare back, and with only a halter to guide, galloped off with all speed.

The astonished Pomeranian followed the bold rider with his eyes, failing in his stupidity to comprehend the situation until it was too late, as the fugitive had by this time disappeared among the trees. In half an hour Kurt had crossed the upper ford. Fearing that he might meet some of the enemy, even at that early

hour, he again sought the shelter of the woods. Hardly had he done so when the first flakes of the coming snowstorm fell at his feet.

When late at night he reached the vicinity of the Benedictine Monastery, the ground was covered with a heavy white blanket, against which every dark object stood out in bold relief.

Tired and hungry, having eaten but little during the day, he applied at the monastery gate for food and shelter.

The layman who answered Kurt's bold summons, on noticing his uniform, asked if he wished to see Prince Steffel.

"Is he quartered here?" asked the boy, in alarm.

"Most certainly he is," was the reply. "Thou shouldst know it."

"I suppose I should," stammered Kurt, "but I am not a Pomeranian soldier."

Then informing the layman as to his name and business, he asked that he might speak to the Abbot in private. In a few moments he was ushered into the astonished prelate's presence, while his horse was being cared for in company with the mules and donkeys belonging to the establishment.

One can imagine with what interest the sympathizing old Abbot listened to Kurt's rapid but graphic recital of events. He sat before a rousing fire in the pri-

vate audience room of the Monastery, enjoying a plentiful supper, while his Reverence questioned him regarding the exciting scenes, of which, so far, only the vaguest rumors had reached him.

"Since the forcible entry of the Godless Prince and his impudent knights within these sacred walls," quoth he, "I have been almost a prisoner myself. The bad man keeps so watchful an eye on me, I have not dared to make the attempt to communicate either with the Princess Ursula at Falkenstein, or her father and Knight Conrad at Waldhorst. It was lucky for thee, my boy, that, probably owing to the snowstorm, there happened to be no sentinel posted at the gate when thou didst ask for admission. Thy presence here must be kept a profound secret. Thou must sleep on yonder couch. As this room adjoins my own, I shall awake thee ere daylight, trusting that before any of Prince Steffel's men are stirring, thou shalt have gotten beyond their reach. Tell the Princess how my heart aches for her and those dear to her, and that we pray daily at mass for the deliverance of the noble Duke and Knight Conrad, as well as of Volga and the young Count of Waldhorst, the noble son of that wicked though repentant sire, whom I have found it hard to forgive."

On the day following, just as the sun, after its work of melting the snow, sank behind the dripping wooded

hills, our young servitor, besplashed with mud, and mounted on his forlorn, woe-begone looking steed, presented himself at the castle of Falkenstein.

Ursula and the Duchess were seated in a cozy room in the palace, talking as usual of the absent ones, and listening to cheering words, from the now convalescent minstrel.

When Kurt's arrival was announced, Ursula could hardly believe her ears. Wild with joy, she ordered him into her presence. The beaming boy entered the room, fell on his knees and kissed again and again the hand of his beloved mistress. His voice trembling with emotion, he replied to the anxious inquiries after her father and lover, and sitting at her feet, delivered their messages in full, putting her in possession of all that had happened to them as well as to himself.

Wolfram was exceedingly proud of his protege, complimenting him in such unqualified terms on the courage and manliness which he had evinced during all the varied scenes of his trying imprisonment and escape, and, in fact, was so generally pleased at his conduct, that the boy was more than compensated for the perils which he had so recently undergone.

"And now," said the minstrel, gallantly, "seeing that thou hast really entered the service of the Princess, I feel reconciled to my loss; and I trust that thy heart will remain as true and faithful as ever."

"We are, indeed, greatly beholden to thee, dear boy," added Ursula, "but do not forget that it was the hand of an all-ruling God that guided thee through every peril. Let us all give thanks to him this night, before we seek repose."

"Amen," softly responded the minstrel.

Kurt's cup of happiness was so full that it was impossible for him to close his eyes for many hours. As he lay, his heart went up in thankfulness for his deliverance; but the praises which he had received from the lovely Princess were dearer to him than life.

With the prayer that she and Conrad might be soon reunited, and thinking alternately of her and of his ideal knight, he at last fell asleep.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE SIEGE AND SURRENDER.

"'Tis not now who's stout and bold?
But, who bears hunger best, and cold?
And he's approved the most deserving
Who longest can hold out at starving."

—*Butler.*

"Uncertainty! Fell demon of our fears! The human soul
That can support despair, supports not thee!"

—*Mallet.*

A day after Kurt's departure from Waldhorst, our friends once more held a council of war to determine how long their provisions could hold out at the rate they were using them.

Finding that there was barely enough left to keep man and beast alive during the winter, they debated whether or not it were the wiser plan to eat and drink sufficiently each day to keep all in fair fighting trim. They finally came to the decision that this would be best, taking into consideration the chances of some fortunate turn in affairs, such as Prince

Steffel's possible abandonment of the siege, or the arrival of the promised relief sooner than expected.

They consequently settled down to a strict military routine, drilling the men, and exercising horses in the courtyard at night, to avoid the bolts of the enemy's sharpshooters, stationed on the cemetery hill overlooking the castle. The besiegers closely encompassed the fortress, rendering any concerted attempt at escape futile; yet not one of that brave little band ever dreamed of abandoning his comrades and seeking personal safety in flight.

As the season advanced the moat became frozen over. Though the ice increased in thickness, and was covered by heavy and repeated falls of snow, the water underneath still ran in a swift current, forcing its way in and out through the subterranean passages. With this wintry bridge thus formed across it, the chances for escape increased; but the probability of another attack became much more imminent. Notwithstanding this danger, the heroic little band determined to stand at its post, and still further strengthen the defenses of the castle.

Prince Steffel, however, seemed averse to renewing the attack, as he remained absent from camp.

Day after day passed in suspense, each bringing with it some new privation to the garrison. Volga, Hugo, the Duke, Conrad and Henry the Guide kept

up their equestrian exercises by the light from the castle windows, riding in circle, and attempting to outdo each other in feats of horsemanship.

Volga soon distinguished herself in this way, though frequently admonished by the Duke for her recklessness.

One night she astonished all by standing on her horse, stepping from him at a full gallop to the back of another ridden by Hugo, and subsequently to Conrad's, behind whom she sat down in triumph. The ability to perform this extraordinary feat proved her salvation, as we shall see later on.

Each evening the besieged would sit talking over the uneventful day, speculating on the doings of their friends at Falkenstein. In this way two months of monotonous life passed, when one morning, to the dismay of all, it was discovered that the ice in the moat had given way during the night, settling down to its bottom and choking up the outlet.

This sudden stoppage of their water supply they were at a loss to account for, though suspecting Prince Steffel's hand in it. That he had actually been at work, during his absence, damming the river above the castle and diverting its course into the valley, they found out later on. This untoward circumstance proved a dire calamity for man and beast. To add to this, Prince Steffel appeared before the walls, demand-

ing surrender, promising at the same time to treat the inmates as honorable prisoners of war. Spring, however, was now so near with its promise of certain relief, and a well-founded distrust in the promises of the Prince as well induced the besieged to refuse compliance with his demand; so he departed and concocted plans for further mischief.

But alas! by the end of March affairs were becoming desperate. They came to the conclusion that it would be impossible to hold out longer. They remained without tidings from Ursula. The still swollen rivers were likely to longer retard the arrival of the forces from Luxemburg. The last sack of flour had been baked. The well in the courtyard had gone dry. The supply of melted snow and rain which they had caught had become undrinkable. It was thus that famine stared them in their faces, on which privation had already made its mark. This made the surrender inevitable. They resolved that if in another day no help appeared, they should make the best possible terms with Prince Steffel.

The next morning Hugo climbed wearily up the highest tower and strained his eyes in the vain hope of discovering in the far distant valley some signs of coming relief. Returning to his friends, his look of disappointment rendered words superfluous.

Accordingly, he seized a white flag of truce, and

holding a short conference with the Duke and Conrad, again mounted the drawbridge, which was then at once lowered to its level. Requesting an interview with the Pomeranian Prince, he was reported to be absent, but expected to return on the day following.

As their condition was now so desperate, Hugo decided, if possible, to make terms with those next in command, as follows: First, that he should surrender the fortress. Second, that Volga, the Duke, Conrad and himself should be allowed to keep their arms and horses, awaiting the arrival of the Prince; and third, that the rest of the garrison should be treated as honorable prisoners; finally, that all of them should immediately be fed within the castle and be allowed to remain under its roof overnight, or until such time as Prince Steffel should return.

The knight in command at first seemed disinclined to grant these conditions; but he finally agreed to them with the exception of their remaining overnight, for reasons best known to himself.

Hugo communicated this ultimatum to his friends. Returning to the bridge, he accepted the terms. That afternoon, after hunger had been satisfied by a supply of food and drink, the men, women and children, mounted and dismounted, with Henry, the guide, at their head, crossed the drawbridge, and were quartered in a long shed, which until lately had served as

a barracks for Prince Steffel's squires. Duke Henry, Conrad and Hugo, fully armed, accompanied by Volga, who carried her crossbow defiantly, rode over the bridge. A few minutes later, they were consigned to the witch's cabin. Their horses, meanwhile, remained saddled, tied to a tree across the road.

They found the interior of the hut greatly disturbed, for in spite of the superstition connected with it, it had been used to stable the Prince's horses. Pieces of the broken furniture had been thrown, along with straw, on the old rubbish pile in the corner.

When the door of the shed had closed upon them, being much refreshed by their recent meal, they stood close together in the darkness to commune with each other over the situation.

They had every reason to fear that on the morrow the terms of surrender would be greatly changed for the worse, if not entirely cancelled by the brutal Prince; so they naturally concentrated their thoughts on devising some possible means of escape. Conrad was the first to suggest the subterranean passage of the cave, by which he and the Duke successfully evaded pursuit nearly a year before. He felt almost sure that this exit from the hut remained open and undiscovered by the enemy. But what chance had they of

escape without horses, even though they should succeed in reaching and passing through the now dry cave.

While they were discussing this point, a bright light suddenly flashed into the cabin, through its only opening, the hole in the roof. At the same time a peculiar crackling noise was heard. Just at that moment a soldier entered the cabin with food and drink for their supper, and as the unwonted glare still puzzled them, Conrad asked of the man an explanation. "The castle is ablaze," replied the soldier. "It has been fired by orders from our august Prince;" saying which, he slammed the door, bolting it behind him. Hugo, beside himself with rage, shook his clenched fist at the imaginary figure of the detested enemy who had ordered the destruction of his fine ancestral inheritance. As he now understood the motive of the Pomeranians in insisting on its evacuation, the young Count, with vengeance at heart, exerted himself to work out the problems of their escape. While eating his supper, the increasing glare of the burning castle seemed to set his brain on fire.

"I've hit upon a plan," he suddenly exclaimed, rising. "I will crawl out through that hole upon the roof, climb over it in the shade of the overhanging rock, get to the ground among the bushes, cross to where the horses are tied, mount my own, and taking the

others with me around the turn, enter the thicket before any alarm can be given. Once among the trees, there will be no danger of pursuit, particularly as I will make my way to a hidden path which leads to the mouth of the cave. There I will wait for you while you make your way through its clay bed. Thou, Volga, knowest the path?"

"Yes, dear Hugo," replied the girl, "I know it well; but what if we fail to reach thee through the cave?"

"That must not be," answered Hugo. "What sayest thou, Conrad, and thou, my lord Duke?"

"I have more confidence in our getting through that dark passage than in thy meeting us with the horses," replied the Duke.

"So have I," said Conrad, "and I wish we could devise a plan which would not involve so great a risk to thee, Hugo."

"Listen!" interposed the brave youth, with decision. "Nothing ventured, nothing gained. Our position here is a desperate one, and we can expect no mercy from that merciless boor. If we fail in our attempt to escape, we shall be no worse off. In either case, I presume we shall be killed."

"That is true," said Volga, "and I have full faith in the success of thy undertaking, Hugo; meanwhile we shall do our best to make our way through the cave's dry bed."

Without further parley Conrad went to the corner. In order not to disturb the appearance of the refuse heap, he pushed it carefully aside, disclosing the well-known narrow opening. Beyond it, in the dark passage, instead of the rushing water which greeted his ears the year before, silence reigned supreme. In a corner of the rocky niche stood three well-corked stone jars, which on examination, Duke Henry and Conrad pronounced to contain some of the mysterious liquid whose invigorating properties they both had tested during their first visit to the hut. Could it be that the old witch had hidden these bottles for them, knowing that they would again try to escape by this path? It almost seemed so.

"And who knows," said the Duke, "but that the poor demented woman, after her imaginary mission on earth had been fulfilled, may have thrown herself into the dark current beyond to end her miserable existence?"

At Conrad's suggestion they all took a long draught from one of the jars, which, stirring their blood, seemed to infuse new strength into their bodies. The Duke no longer attempted to dissuade Hugo from his hazardous undertaking.

To facilitate his movements, the young Count removed his armor, an example followed soon after by his male companions. To prevent recognition by the

enemy he kept only his short hunting sword which he concealed beneath his doublet. The Duke, Volga and Conrad bade him godspeed, the latter, with his strong arms, lifting him up to climb upon the roof through the hole above. Having reached it, Hugo crept down in the shade close by the rocks and dropped noiselessly to the ground. The creaking of the old structure being lost in the crackling of the conflagration escaped the ears of the two sentinels mechanically pacing up and down before the hut, whose present occupants, as far as the narrow brains of the soldiers were able to conceive, had but one means of egress.

Hugo saw them from his hiding place pacing quite near him and was puzzled for a moment what to do next. Not far off he descried men sleeping on their arms in open tents and the horses he longed to secure still tied some distance back, across the road, to a tree which was shaded from the fire's glare.

The brave youth crept along the rock until he came nearly opposite the horses. There he lay down, feigning to be sound asleep. For a short while, one of the sentinels passed and repassed without noticing him. Presently, as he approached, Hugo snored aloud, in order to attract his attention. The ruse succeeded as he knew by a kick in the ribs, and a gruff voice demanding what he was doing there. He pretended to be very drunk, and waited for a second kick before he



The Duke, Volga, and Conrad bade him godspeed.

replied with a thickened utterance and assumed stupidity, that he must have rolled there in his sleep.

"Get back to thy tent, thou pig!" growled the sentinel, kicking him over and over again, across the road to the trees. There he left the supposed drunkard, paying no more attention to him. Hugo, however, kept on rolling toward the horses, feeling assured that by not having resented his hard usage, he had saved his own life, and possibly, the lives of his friends as well.

Once out of sight of the sentinels, he worked his way quickly, though carefully, on all fours, toward the coveted tree; but before reaching it, he nearly stumbled over a recumbent body, seemingly that of a Pomeranian lanzknecht. He drew his hunting sword; but as the prostrate form remained immovable, he scanned the face closely and to his amazement recognized Kurt, apparently unconscious, with his hands and feet tied. Hugo called him by name close to his ear, which caused him to open his eyes with wonder and see the familiar features of the young Count, who motioned him to keep quiet. Hugo quickly cut the lad's bonds, asking in a whisper what had brought him again to such a pass.

"I came from Falkenstein," softly answered the boy, "with a message to you from the Princess that the Luxemburg knights were crossing the Rhine and

would probably reach the ferry at the Benedictine Monastery within two days. When I arrived here an hour ago," continued the boy, "I saw the castle on fire, and my heart sank within me. I suppose I became careless about being seen, for I was suspected, questioned and taken before the commander of this camp, who ordered me to be bound hand and foot and thrown here until the coming of Prince Steffel. He, I know, will recognize me. I had given up all hope and lay here resigned to my fate."

Hugo, in a few low, hasty words, told the boy what had transpired, then ordering him to take Volga's horse from among those fastened nearby and to follow him closely, he was about to get among them when Kurt whispered: "Lady Volga's horse is not there. I did not see him anywhere. My own good steed, however, under yonder tree, is at her service, should I succeed in reaching him."

"We will see," Hugo replied. "I may decide to take Volga on behind me and despatch thee to Falkenstein. Try to get thy horse; Only if thou failest to reach him, will I start without thee."

The boy was off, creeping behind tents on his hands and knees. In a short time Hugo saw him peep over the back of his steed, watching his own movements. He lost no time in getting between the horses which were to carry him and his friends. With the

bridles of two of them in his hand, he mounted his own, and proceeded to pick his way quickly between the trees. Before he had reached the illuminated road, however, the two sentinels perceived him. Running toward him they shouted lustily. As the first one neared the heels of the rear horse, he received a kick which rolled him over, groaning. The other attempted to seize Hugo's horse at the bridle bit, but fell back with a loud cry, with his hand badly cut by a savage blow from its rider's sword.

In a moment they were off at full gallop; but by this time the whole camp was in an uproar, armed soldiers running out of their tents, and a detachment of fifty horsemen mounting in haste for the pursuit. Just then another rider, a Pomeranian lanzknecht, was seen making his way through the trees. The last to gain the road, he seemed to pursue the fugitives. It was well for Kurt that he urged his Hungarian to his utmost; for hardly had he rounded the turn, when he caught sight of the gallant Hugo before him, on the point of disappearing with his led horses into a thicket, who were now closely followed by the boy. A moment later, the horsemen rounded the corner, expecting to see in the well lighted road the fugitives, whoever they might be. One can imagine their astonishment and chagrin when no traces of them were visible.

The knight in command halted his men, and gave

vent to his disappointment in curses. In his search for fresh impressions of horses' hoofs, he was unsuccessful, as they had been entirely obliterated by those of his own riders. After looking in vain among the intricate bushes and trees for some sign, he returned crestfallen to camp, still cursing his luck, which he knew would bring down upon his head the wrath of Prince Steffel. The sentinel with the lacerated hand approached him and said that the fugitive with the led horses looked like one of the prisoners confined in the witch's hut, and the other, in the Pomeranian garb, resembled the spy captured in camp a few hours before.

"What were you damned sentinels about then?" roared the captain.

"We never left our posts," answered the one who was still half doubled up by the kick he had received; "that witch's den, however, is no safe place to confine anyone."

"Hold thy tongue, thou fool," cried the Knight in command of the camp, just then approaching. "Open the door and we shall see who is within."

The order was quickly obeyed. To their dismay, they found the cabin empty. The soldiers crossed themselves, looking at each other in blank wonder. On the floor of the dirty hovel lay three suits of armor, Hugo's battle-axe and Volga's cloak.

The commander was the first to recover from his

astonishment. Looking around, he saw the signs of someone having escaped through the hole in the roof; and never dreaming of an opening behind the rubbish, took it for granted that all the fugitives had escaped through the same aperture. In a great rage, he accused the sentinels of treachery and had them put in irons. An immediate search throughout the camp was then ordered, and a body of riders sent to scour the surrounding country.

The return of the Prince was awaited in fear and trembling. When he arrived the next day, his vassals soon learned that their fears were well founded. He was in great glee over the capitulation and destruction of the castle, and eager to take final vengeance on the Duke and Conrad.

When he learned that they had escaped and two others with them, his rage knew no bounds. He ordered the two sentinels to be summarily beheaded. The captain he had flogged within an inch of his life and dismissed from service. Then all the prisoners were brought before the vindictive conquerer. With the exception of Henry the guide, of whom we shall hear later on, he then condemned them to death, regardless of sex or age.

After these cruel orders were executed, he broke camp, concentrating his forces on the right side of the river, the better to intercept the army from Luxemburg, and prevent its junction with the Princess Ursula.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE FLIGHT.

"For those that fly may fight again,
Which he can never do that's slain;
Hence timely cunning's no mean part
Of conduct in the martial art."

—*Hudibras.*

To go back to our friends. With every sense on the alert, they had heard the uproar in the camp. Feeling almost certain that Hugo had succeeded in securing the horses, they, without further delay, cast off their armor, secured their battle-axes to their sides and entered the subterranean passage, replacing the refuse partition most carefully behind them.

Conrad took the advance, guiding Volga through the darkness and deathlike stillness, broken only by the faint echo of their footsteps. The Duke followed, carrying the stone jars tied together by their necks.

On arriving at the river bed, they made out, simply by touch, one of the witch's boats hanging by its fastening in the cave; but it served to no purpose save to steady them as they gained a foothold in the soft mud which they now encountered.

As they stood ankle-deep in the mire, holding on to each other for support, they descried in the long distance before them the same opening, through which a frail boat, carried by a roaring torrent, had so rapidly taken two of their number the year before. Without stopping to weigh the chances of reaching it in the present condition of the cave, they started on their difficult journey. It proved even a harder task than they had anticipated; their path being filled with large and small pieces of rock imbedded in it, rendering each step not only uncertain but dangerous. Before they had proceeded far, Volga slipped and wrenched her ankle so badly that she was unable to walk. Conrad took her on his back, saying with a laugh, "I must needs be thy donkey until we reach the horses." The brave girl replied in the same joking tones: "I like my donkey greatly; I prefer him to my horse; but I fear the donkey will tire sooner of his load."

"Perhaps so," answered our hero, "but not, I trow, as soon as thou thinkest. Look out there! Steady, Duke! Here we go!" A slippery rock which lay in their path, over which they stumbled, brought them all to grief. They lay sprawling in the mud.

"What a lovely picture we would present," said Volga, whom Conrad was helping to rise, "did the light from that opening penetrate this far."

"Yes," replied he, "and how will we look, mounted on our steeds, when daylight appears?"

"It seems to me," here interposed the Duke, "that the water from the river has backed up into the cave and that before we reach the opening, we may have to swim."

"That will at least clean us, even at the risk of drowning," said Conrad, laughingly.

As they hurried their steps, still stumbling and sliding, the light on the water's surface became plainly visible. They met with no further accidents, however, and gradually the ground became harder, and the walking less laborious.

As they reached the water they halted. Conrad, placing Volga on her feet, wiped the perspiration from his brow.

"The donkey is tired," said he; "it wants rest and a drink!"

"I think a drink from these jars will revive all of us," said the Duke; "we must have started over an hour ago."

"My foot is better," exclaimed Volga, pressing her weight upon it, "I think I can now walk with thy help, Conrad, the clinging mud must have cured it."

"Good news for me, thy discharged donkey," was the bantering answer. Thus joking they managed to enliven their perilous journey.

They drank in renewed courage from the old witch's jars. The mouth of the cave had grown in size. Pressing onward again, they gradually found themselves knee deep in water, which made walking difficult, particularly for Volga. A few steps further on, swimming was decided upon, which, with their heavy weapons, proved no easy task. Volga placed her hand on Conrad's shoulder, floating without effort, while he struck out vigorously. The Duke, swimming manfully, kept close to his friend. Struggling onward, without actually getting beyond their depth, they soon, emerged from the cave. Landing on the shore, to their great joy, they found Hugo with the horses awaiting them.

One can imagine the young Count's delight, when, after two hours' waiting in suspense he greeted his friends unharmed. There they stood, dripping under the star-studded sky, still slightly illuminated by the glare of the now distant conflagration. As Volga, almost immediately, noticed that her horse was missing, she turned to Hugo, in alarm, for the reason. He explained how he had found but three horses tied to the tree, Kurt near them a prisoner, and that after the boy had cleverly made his escape, he had despatched him on horseback to Falkenstein to apprise the Princess of what had happened.

"You must be very tired, good friends," continued

he, "but as you are wet to the skin and I feel chilly after my two hours' waiting, perhaps we had better be off and warm ourselves by exercise."

"It hardly seems possible," said Conrad, "that we have been so long in the cave, now we are out of it. Verily, the cold water and the witch's drink must have in turn revived us. Hugo, try a taste of that inspiring beverage."

"Indeed I will, for I need it," answered the young Count, "and I think you will all be better for another good draught after your wetting."

Accordingly, they refreshed themselves. A moment later they were in their saddles. Volga took her seat, to start with, behind Hugo. In high spirits they rode through the woods to the secret ford, which they crossed in safety in spite of the still swollen condition of the river. On gaining the open road, they put their horses to a full run, feeling reasonably sure that none of the enemy would be prowling about during the night, except possibly such as might have been sent out in search of them by way of the upper ford. From that possibility they were now rapidly galloping. Every stride of their powerful steeds brought them nearer to their destination. Not until daylight did they slacken their pace, or think of taking to the byways to avoid danger. Their route passed through thickly wooded regions. At sunrise they reached the

fields and meadows in the lovely garb of spring. Here they allowed their horses to walk.

At noon they arrived at a farmhouse whose inmates were known to Hugo. They were at first greatly alarmed, taking them for Pomeranian foragers, who had already carried away most of their cattle and provisions. When our friends made themselves known the fears of the good peasants were quickly allayed. With faces beaming with hospitality, they informed their now welcome guests that some little had been saved from the marauders, and that a repast would soon be ready for them, and their horses meanwhile well fed. The fugitives made a most excellent meal and enjoyed a good rest before pursuing their journey.

In the afternoon they neared the river. As far as the eye could reach no signs of the enemy were seen, save a few far distant camps on the opposite shore. In order to reach the ruins of Grunau that day, it was necessary to keep the road for some time, being ready at any moment to take to the woods at the first approach of danger.

As the highway continued clear of all traces of soldiery, they unconsciously passed the last copse of woods which would have afforded them refuge in case of surprise. Remembering this a little later, they galloped on rather recklessly, trusting to fortune and

their good horses to carry them to the ruins, which Kurt had told Hugo were not occupied by the enemy. As the towers of the Benedictine Monastery loomed up in the distance, they became suddenly aware that they had come upon a small Pomeranian camp, which, until that moment, had been hidden among the trees. Whether they had been seen or not they did not take time to decide.

The ruined battlements of Grunau were already in sight; so they pressed toward them with their horses at full speed. Looking backward they saw that the enemy were astir. A moment later a score or more riders started in pursuit. In the exciting race which followed, the fugitives managed to maintain for a time the distance between them and their pursuers. This they would not have had the slightest chance of doing, but for the superior breed of their horses, each of which had in turn been carrying a double load. Volga, just then, happened to be seated behind Conrad. Hugo noticed that their steaming steed was beginning to lag behind. Riding close up to her, he asked, hurriedly, if she thought she could change horses at the pace they were going. Without a word, the brave girl gained her feet, and the next moment leaped from behind Conrad; but slipping, threw her arms around Hugo's neck to save herself, nearly unhorsing him. Recovering himself, the young Count drove his spurs



On they sped once more at a terrific gait.



into his powerful horse's flanks, and on they sped once more at a terrific gait. The knight in command of the pursuers had meanwhile gained considerably upon them. The Duke, in advance of the others, passed by the monastery gate just as the Abbot, hearing the tramp of horses and the shouts of the pursuing riders, looked hurriedly from his window and saw Conrad with his battle-axe engaged in single combat with the full mailed Pomeranian leader, who, the next moment, fell wounded from his horse.

Our hero forged ahead, narrowly escaping some of the foremost horsemen. The Duke gained the ruins, entered the outer courtyard through its open gate, and springing from his horse, picked up a large beam, placing it upright beside the opening just as Hugo with Volga dashed through. A moment later Conrad entered, half a dozen Pomeranians at his heels.

The Duke slammed the heavy gate in their faces, and with Conrad's aid placed the beam against the solid barrier, fastening its end securely in the ground.

For a moment they were safe. The pursuers, being deprived of their leader, were undecided what to do. Some remained to guard the gate, while the others returned to their wounded captain.

The Abbot no longer delayed. Hurriedly leaving his post of observation, he despatched, by the way of the underground passage, two trusty laymen with

provisions to the ruins. Following soon after, clad in full armor and carrying a battle-axe, he confronted Conrad suddenly in the banquet hall, reminding him forcibly of the apparition of the year before, but the Abbot gave him no chance to speak.

"I have come," he cried, "to help you all here in this doubtful stronghold. I saw you on the road. God be praised that you escaped from the hirelings of that godless Prince! Just now he is away, but he may return at any moment to attack you. I had this old armor in my closet; though too small for me now, I managed to get into it. I also found my old battle-axe and some shields, which my trusted monks will bring to you. Some will remain to assist in defending these ruins. I trust that other assistance will soon reach you. The boy Kurt passed through here some hours ago, telling me of your flight. He expects to arrive at Falkenstein tomorrow before daylight.

After this recital the breathless Abbot refreshed himself with a glass of wine from the stores he had himself spread before his guests, to whom, after their recent privations, they seemed a godsend.

The Abbot expressed his particular delight at seeing Volga, whom he had not laid eyes on since, as a little girl, she had been carried away by Hans von Waldhorst. He reminded her that she was in her native castle, which interested her greatly; but being

exhausted on account of the fatigue and excitement of the trying day, she retired early and soon fell into a deep sleep.

The Abbot, meanwhile, in helping to finish the last bottle, continued his talk. "I had given up hoping to see you all again," he said. "That Pomeranian Prince! Holy Virgin, how I hate him! still has his quarters at the monastery, and may return at any moment. I am here to fight against him by your side, my brothers, whom I love, and for the sake of our noble Princess Ursula, whom we all love, and in whose cause, if need be, we are ready to fight and die. I am a soldier now, no longer a monk. I shall immediately send one of my laymen to Falkenstein to inform the Princess of the perilous position in which you are placed, as you cannot tell what may happen. The forces from Luxemburg may be retarded in their movements, and Prince Steffel may find occasion to attack you. We must fortify this place; so I shall at once set to work with my monks, and continue throughout the night, if necessary, while you lie down and rest after your late severe trials."

It was wonderful to see the energy with which this extraordinary man set about directing his assistants, and putting his own hands to the work. Before daybreak he had finished barricading all accessible points,

and had fortified the dilapidated main entrance to the inner courtyard, by filling it up with heavy stones from the fallen walls around, on the top of which only a narrow passage was left, small enough to be defended by one man.

Other heavy stones were carried to the battlements, ready to be hurled down upon the heads of the enemy. A large break in the rear of the ruins, the wall of which had fallen into a remnant of the moat, was so very steep, that it seemed absolutely impossible for any one to ascend it, so the Abbot feared no attack from that quarter. Little did he dream that something was to happen on the following day which would draw the attention of Prince Steffel to that very breach, the accessibility of which might otherwise have remained undiscovered.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE SACRIFICE.

"Alas! what stay is there in human state,
Or who can shun inevitable fate?"

—*Dryden.*

"He hath fought today,
As if a god, in hate of mankind, had
Destroy'd in such a shape."

—*Shaks. Antony and Cleopatra.*

The next morning, soon after sunrise, Conrad was roused from a sound sleep by one of the monks who had been on guard all night. This man informed him that a young soldier in Pomeranian garb had climbed up the steep back breach before daylight, that he had stated he came from Falkenstein with a message to the Duke and Knight Conrad. He gave his name as Kurt, and was now asleep on the battlements with a large sword in his arms. Our hero arose. Ascending the winding steps he stood beside the sleeping boy, in whose hands, to his great delight, he beheld his good blade clasped tightly, as though he were fearful that someone would take it from him.

Kurt, stretching himself, awoke. Perceiving Conrad he jumped up and handed him the sword, saying that it had been confided to him by the Princess Ursula.

"I arrived at Falkenstein," he added, "late last night. Within an hour I was again in the saddle on my way to this place, where I learned from a monk sent by you, to the Princess, and whom I met on the way, that you had actually arrived and were fortifying yourselves. This man went on. The Princess told me that she would be ready to start to your assistance with a goodly number of mounted knights at sunrise this morning. She expected to reach the ferry before nightfall, where she hoped her ally from Luxemburg would join her.

"Thou bringest good news, my brave boy," said Conrad; "and now that we may hope for relief, and may defend ourselves to the last, my father's sword is doubly welcome. But where is thy horse, Kurt?"

"Among the trees yonder," replied the boy, "where I hope he may not be discovered; but look! Sir Knight; there he is at the foot of this huge pile of stones, which I had hard work to climb, evidently bent upon following my example."

Sure enough, the faithful animal was trying to gain a foothold along the fallen ruins, and to trace his master's steps up the steep ascent. He was already half

way up. Kurt hesitated no longer, but rushing down the breach, reached the side of his pet. Together they climbed the rest of the way, supporting each other, and nearly coming to grief more than once before they arrived at the battlements. They little knew that Prince Steffel, who had just returned to the monastery, had closely watched their movements from his window for at least ten minutes.

He had returned that morning from the smoking ruins of Waldhorst Castle in a surly humor, being still at breakfast when it was reported to him that the escaped prisoners had entrenched themselves in the ruins of Grunau.

Thinking that it would be an easy matter for a small detachment of his troops to reduce the old dilapidated place and recapture its inmates, he simply ordered an attack, while he devoted his own energy to vanquishing the monastery wines and enjoying his ease, as was his wont to do before taking the field.

He was already informed that the army of Luxemburg had been delayed, and it would be impossible on that day for it to encounter his forces then awaiting it across the river. For once, however, he was unaware of the Princess Ursula's departure from Falkenstein that morning.

Meanwhile our friends and the Abbot were seated around an improvised table partaking of a breakfast

just sent from the monastery. They had hardly finished when a monk, on the lookout, reported a number of the enemy advancing with scaling ladders, evidently intending an immediate assault.

They quickly prepared to defend the position. The Duke and Hugo donned the two suits of mail set up in the banquet hall, too small for Conrad, who having no armor, was forced to content himself with a shield and a steel cap which he had found; but with his trusty sword and the Princess' dagger, which he had won at the tournament, he felt equal to any emergency. He took his position, single-handed, on the narrow ledge above the inner entrance. Kurt was stationed near him inside the walls. The Abbot, with the heaviest battle-axe in hand, planted himself on the front battlement, the Duke and the two other monks being near, ready for those who might attempt to mount the ladders, with stones to be hurled on their heads. Hugo took his stand at another weak point close to an old ruined tower, in which the dauntless Volga had hidden with her crossbow. From there the girl overlooked the outer courtyard, toward which the attack was evidently directed.

On came the Pomeranians, entering the enclosure by battering down the insecure gate, and advancing in solid mass against the fortified ruins. Heavy stones were rained down upon them. One of the knights

in command fell by a bolt from Volga's crossbow, which pierced his armor at the neck. Those that tried to scale the battlements were hurled back among their fellows. When Conrad swung his immense sword, the dead and wounded were piled upon each other; yet on they came, knights and soldiers taking the places of their fallen comrades. Conrad was wounded and Kurt left his post to inform the Abbot of the misfortune. A few moments later the brave old Monastic Knight stood in Conrad's place, wielding his ponderous battle-axe with telling effect, while our hero tried to stop the flow of blood from a wound in his left shoulder.

Two knights with a large body of followers now advanced upon the Abbot, determined to carry the main entrance to the fortress, and put an end to its valiant defender. That intrepid warrior, however, utterly reckless of his own personal safety, advanced boldly against this force, and while their weapons glanced harmlessly from shield and mail, his battle-axe dealt such blows upon their heads that they rolled on top of one another. One of these soldiers, thinking the champion bore a charmed life, cried out in alarm: "It is a fiend who has taken the shape of the late Baron! Ye cannot harm him! Fly, comrades! Fly!"

A knight struck down this coward; but he himself received a moment later a death wound from Volga's shaft. Deeming this a bad omen, the superstitious

soldiers fell back, and being pursued single-handed by the Abbot, who grew more reckless still, they became thoroughly alarmed and fled from the ruins, all save one knight, who rallied two stout squires and with them faced their charmed enemy. It was lucky for him at this critical moment that Conrad was able to come to his assistance; for with his timely aid, he made short work of these heavily mailed Pomeranians, two being left dead on the field, while the third joined in the general flight.

"Many thanks, my friend," ejaculated the puffing Abbot, "thou camest to me in the nick of time."

"Thou art a perfect wonder, Sir Knight of St. Benedictus," replied Conrad. "I never saw such bravery and activity! What a powerful arm thou dost wield!"

"Oh, that's nothing!" answered the Abbot, though manifestly pleased at his young friend's praise.

Fastening the battered outer gate as well as they could with the beam, they returned to the ruins rejoicing in their victory, though well aware that they had encountered but a comparatively small force, and were by no means secure from further assault.

Prince Steffel, having watched the attack, became furious when he saw his knights and vassals repulsed by so small a number.

"What?" he cried. "A mere handful of men intrenched within those miserable ruins defy me? We

shall see! By our lady, I'll go myself and show these cowards how to take an old heap of stones!"

He had courage enough, this lazy Pomeranian, but it needed rousing. The larger part of his army was inactive across the river, and he might have attacked the ruins in force and reduce them, instead of making a personal assault with a small body, as was now his intention. Pushing aside his still unfinished repast, he summoned messengers before him, and despatched them across the river with orders for a few chosen knights to join his immediately.

Meanwhile at the ruins the Abbot was walking around, the hero of the hour. To all the praises of his friends, he replied, "I am a young man again; and since I have tasted blood, long for more, and for a chance to drive my battle-axe deep into that boor's head. I would fain split open that block of iniquity."

"I believe thee, thou valiant knight," said the Duke, "but perchance thy head might be the first one split, which God forfend! Volga! those bolts which disabled the two Pomeranians—was it thy steady hand which sent them?"

"Yes, my lord," modestly answered the girl. "Standing within that tower, I was able, while unseen, to take good aim, but I have only one bolt left."

"Thou didst well, brave girl!" said Duke Henry, "and notwithstanding the valor and prowess of our

Benedictine warrior here, I think it possible we might have lost the fight but for those timely shots."

"Very likely," interposed the Abbot. "I do not remember much concerning these deeds of mine which ye are pleased to call wonderful; but it does seem passing strange that my niece here, the daughter of the late Baron von Grunau, should have taken so prominent a part in the defense of these walls within which she first saw the light some seventeen years ago."

Just at this moment the monk who had been stationed on the lookout entered excitedly, reporting an unusual movement on the part of the enemy. The whole party ascended the tower. From its height they could plainly see Prince Steffel standing on Monastery Hill surrounded by a throng of followers. From his threatening gestures and the direction in which he looked, they concluded that he was speaking of the feasibility of an attack on the rear breach.

These conjectures proved to be correct. The Prince was indeed calling the attention of his knights to the possibility of crossing the deep ditch and scaling the breach beyond. "Early this morning," he was saying, "I myself saw a horse climbing the ascent, and where a beast can go, we can follow. I shall at once set my men at work clearing some sort of path over the fallen walls, by which we can gain a firmer foothold in

climbing to the battlements. I shall scale them with any of you young men. Before nightfall, every cursed inmate of those dirty ruins shall either have been killed or be a prisoner in my hands."

This address, out of hearing by the besieged, was reported to them almost verbatim by the monk who brought them their mid-day meal. He added, also, that he had heard the Prince order a small contingent of bowmen from across the river to join in the attack.

No time was to be lost. The wearied defenders of Grunau once more made ready to fight to the last and to sell their lives dearly. There was as yet no signs of Ursula, nor was it time to expect her. The sun was still high in the heavens, but already some of the enemy, with picks and shovels, were seen approaching the ditch. Our friends quickly began to hurl stones upon them, and piled up others at the head of the breach to fortify the position.

As the missiles hit the workmen, for every man disabled three or four took his place. Yet it was a full hour before the heights were made accessible for the Prince and his followers.

All at once the flower of Pomeranian knighthood moved forward. Crossing the ditch on a bridge of piled up stones, they began to ascend the heights, some few of the younger and favored knights in advance of the Prince.

They soon reached the stone barrier behind which stood Hugo, Duke Henry and the Abbot, in full armor, with battle-axes raised. Conrad, without mail to protect him, stood a little in the rear. Being weak from his wound, he had to lean against the half fallen tower for support. He was prepared, nevertheless, to face anyone who might gain the battlements. Kurt, sabre in hand, stood near him, ready, if need be, to die either with or for his master; while Volga was again at her point of vantage, crossbow and last bolt in hand, thinking less of her own safety than of the lives so dear to her.

The first of the knights who, out-climbing Prince Steffel, showed themselves above the entrenchment, were hurled backward with shields and heads split open, their bodies serving as steps for those behind. Some bowmen, successful in climbing the wall, were perching on its broad surface; but ere they could get in their work, the Abbot, who seemed everywhere at the same time, was upon them, and split the crossbow and head of each in turn with one blow of his mighty axe.

Conrad still stood husbanding his strength for an emergency, which very soon presented itself.

Two knights having managed to fight their way past the brave defenders of the breach, reached the battlements, and were about to attack them in the rear.

Conrad saw the danger. He quickly threw himself between them and his comrades, felled one of them to earth by his first deadly stroke, receiving a gash from the other on his already wounded shoulder before Kurt could prevent it. The boy's sword had fallen harmless on the mailed knight, who now turned upon him, and with a sweeping stroke hurled him backward some distance. The diversion, however, gave Conrad the opportunity he wanted. His sword quickly descended on his second adversary, who fell dying at his comrade's side.

But now Prince Steffel was seen impatiently breaking his way through the ranks of his knights. Kurt, who had only been slightly hurt, called his master's attention at that moment to a cloud of dust in the distance, through which could be seen, in the front of a brilliant array of knights the figure of Ursula on her matchless Saladin.

"God and all the saints be praised!" shouted Conrad. "There comes the Princess! Fight on, brave comrades! help is at hand!"

With the din of the fray none but Duke Henry heard the shout. As he glanced for a moment off his guard, in the direction of the coming help, he received a thrust which pierced both shield and mail, slightly wounding him. The Abbot paid his score by felling the knight who had faced his friend. Prince Steffel

just then appeared breast high before Hugo, whose axe had just descended on another assailant. Before the brave youth could again raise his weapon or use his shield, the giant's sword had pierced his left side near his heart and he staggered back, the blood gushing from the wound. Volga would have avenged this cruel act, had not the thick mail prevented her bolt, which struck the Prince on the neck, from penetrating any deeper than the skin. Dashing it aside, the giant leaped over the battlements and making a step or two forward was confronted by our young hero, pale and bleeding, with only his sword and dagger for protection, having lost his headgear during his last encounter, and thrown away his shield to ease his wounded shoulder.

A tremendous shout from Ursula's followers now rent the air. The Prince paused and was about to turn his head to learn the cause of the sudden uproar, when his eyes met those of his hated rival. Forgetting everything save revenge, he called out exultingly: "I have thee at last, thou beggar! Thou shalt die like a dog!" With that he aimed a deadly blow at Conrad's head which, with failing strength, he dexterously parried, though the force struck the sword from his grasp. He felt that his time had come. Yet one chance for his life remained. Drawing his long, keen-edged dagger, he sprang at his adversary. Getting in

between him and his shield, before he could strike again, with the spasmodic strength of desperation, he succeeded in planting his blade in the neck of his giant foe, at the very place where Volga's missile had already pierced the armor. With a stifled curse between his lips, the big Pomeranian staggered backward. Falling, with a gurgling sound in his throat, he instantly expired.

Faint and bewildered, scarce realizing what had happened, Conrad stood leaning against the tower. He saw dimly the tall figure of a knight in brilliant armor, who resembled Wolfram, cutting his way through the panic-stricken Pomeranians. He saw also at his feet the dead body of the Prince Commander, whom he had just slain, but he saw no more. His head swam, his eyes closed, his arms fell listlessly at his side, one hand mechanically grasping the bloody dagger, and he became well-nigh unconscious.

A familiar and beloved voice calling him by name quickly revived him. Slowly opening his eyes, he saw Ursula in the act of dismounting from Saladin, whom she had forced up the breach in the wake of her victorious knights. She hurried to the hero's side, her beautiful face animated with anxiety and love. Taking his blood-stained hand in hers, she pressed it to her heart, saying:

"Conrad, my love! thou art indeed sorely wounded,

but I am not too late. No, no, my brave knight; thou wilt live, if only for my sake! Let me support thee!" She gently placed her arm around his bleeding shoulder and pressed her warm, sweet lips to his, which were cold and dry.

"My love!" she repeated with great emotion, as Conrad, unable to speak, watched her with dim though loving eyes, "I am proud of thee. I love thee with all my soul. My worst enemy lies dead at thy feet, slain by thy strong arm. If my devotion can repay thee for what thou hast done and suffered, I shall be happy indeed. And now, sit thee down, my beloved. Let me bind thy wounds; or hast thou strength to go below with my assistance?"

"Ursula, my darling and my life," Conrad at last found strength to say, "do not let us go below just yet. Look around thee for a moment. There stands thy father, safe, thank heaven! and the brave Abbot near him talking to our good friend Wolfram. But who is that yonder? It is Hugo, lying bleeding on the ground, and Volga bending over him. Go, my darling, see if he yet lives. Brave lad! I have learned to love him as a brother."

The Princess took a few steps toward the group of knights, near whom lay the young Count. Drawing nearer she saw the handsome face of the forester blanched with the pallor of death. On his bared

breast, next his heart, close to the wound, lay the engraved image of herself which she had given him at the tournament. Volga, regardless of every one, was trying to stop the flow of his heart's blood, calling out to him, in agonizing accents, to speak to her. Receiving no answer to her despairing appeals, she threw herself on his body and wept aloud.

Ursula, glancing first at the pale face and then at her image so near his heart, realized in that instant how her fleeting fancy for him had been more than repaid. Turning to her father, she threw herself into his arms in a flood of tears. Wolfram noted the beautiful woman's sorrow in silence; then, with a sigh, he turned to the breach, ordering his men to search every nook and bush for any lurking enemy, and to spare none.

The Princess, regaining her composure, turned her eyes to where Conrad stood, following her movements with an intensely longing gaze. All other thoughts but her great love for her own hero vanished; she hastened to his side. When within a step or two of him, something startling arrested her eye. One of the enemy's bowmen, having eluded all search, bent on avenging the death of his Prince, had climbed the wall and was in the act of leveling his crossbow at Conrad. Ursula, horrified, instantly comprehended her lover's danger. Throwing herself in the way, the

bolt intended for him pierced her own devoted breast. The next moment the daring marksman rolled over, his head split open by the Abbot's battle-axe.

Ursula sank down at Conrad's feet, a happy smile flitting over her face.

"Thank God, my own Conrad, I have saved thy life. Thou must live and be happy," she faltered. "Remember Rosalie."

With every word her voice grew fainter. Conrad, with a cry of agony, caught her in his arms.

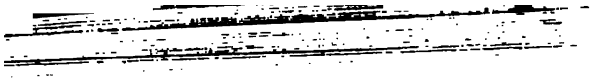
"Kiss me farewell, my own," she murmured, tenderly. "We shall meet again in another—a more beautiful world."

He kissed her quivering lips, while the warm torrent issuing from his wounds mingled with the heart's blood of his dying love. A slight tremor shook her frame. Looking into his eyes with an expression of yearning her sweet spirit took its flight to that land where life is life indeed, and everlasting, and where perfect love rules supreme.

Conrad pressed the beloved eyelids with his ashen lips and staggered to his feet. Looking down, he for the first time noticed the Duke, who was kneeling at the other side of his daughter, sobbing bitterly. If the Princess had seen him, she had not turned to him, her last words and looks being only for her lover. But Duke Henry had heard those words of tender love



Ursula sank down at Conrad's feet.



and trust, and they had moved him greatly. Putting aside all envious feelings, he gave himself up to uncontrollable grief at the loss of his darling daughter.

"She died for thee, my son!" he said, at last, in a broken voice, looking at Conrad. "She loved thee with all her soul. Untimely as is her death, it could not have been more beautiful." He could say no more.

Conrad found it impossible to reply. Leaning back against the wall of the tower, his mind grew confused. The terrible scenes through which he had passed seemed like an evil dream. He became completely dazed. A feeling that he was about to die also and follow his dear love took hold of him, sending a thrill of peaceful joy through his weary and torn heart.

He was about to sink down by the side of the beautiful, inanimate form at his feet when the voice of Kurt brought him back to himself for a moment. Opening his blurred eyes, he saw before him a goblet brimming full of wine, which the heart-broken boy was holding to him, trying to force it between his lips. Conrad at first repelled it. He finally drained it mechanically. As the liquid stirred through his veins, strength and consciousness partially revived.

Kurt offered to assist his master below, but he waved him off, saying: "What is the matter with Saladin? Look at him! Either my eyes deceive me, or he is

wounded and bleeding. Come hither, my faithful steed!"

With Kurt's assistance the fast-failing animal staggered to his master's side. "Poor old Saladin!" muttered Conrad, patting his beautiful neck, "thou, too, art going."

As he said these words, the noble beast rubbed his head faintly against his master's, then trembling violently for a few moments, fell, and rolled gently over so close to the body of Ursula that his head touched hers. With one last tremor, he, too, expired.

"Poor old comrade," whispered Conrad, "faithful to the last, dying for me as did thy mistress!"

He looked intently once more on the face of the dead woman, even more gloriously beautiful, it then seemed, than he had ever seen it in life. Kneeling down, he kissed her cold lips; then summoning all his strength, he took her up bodily and carried her below. There he laid her upon the same couch in the ghastly banquet hall which a year before he had himself occupied. Sinking down on the floor beside her, he, too, was wrapped in merciful oblivion.

Thus, in the pride and power of her youth and loveliness, nobly died Ursula, the brave, the beautiful and the good.

CHAPTER XX.

AT THE HOSPITAL.

"I feel
Of this dull sickness at my heart afraid!
And in my eyes the death-sparks flash and fade;
And something seems to steal
Over my bosom like a frozen hand."

—*Willis.*

The day after the dearly bought victory of Grunau Castle, both the monastery and inn had been converted into hospitals. In the afternoon a bloody battle was fought between the forces under Wolfram, combined with those of Luxemberg, and the now demoralized Pomeranians, in which the latter were nearly annihilated. This added many to the wounded and dying. In the banquet hall at the ruins lay the still forms of Ursula, Hugo and the unconscious Conrad; while every other available nook or shelter was filled with sufferers. The Convent of St. Agnes, which like other convents in Europe had contributed, since the Crusades, nurses for the hospitals, even as far away as the Holy Land, sent its full contingent of nuns to the heart-rending scene.

It was not until the dawn had begun to mingle with the faint light of the solitary lamp in the banquet room, that Conrad awoke to the consciousness of his cruel fate, realizing that he was still alive.

Gradually opening his eyes he found Kurt at his side anxiously watching him. The boy would have shouted with delight at seeing his master show signs of returning life, had he not been warned by the Monk in attendance during the night to keep quiet. Placing his finger against his lips, he whispered softly in Conrad's ear: "Brother Ignatius, the leech, who bound up your lordship's wounds, left this potion to be taken every hour. He told me under no circumstances to allow you to talk. I will tell you of those about whom you are anxious. The leech has been busy over the body of Count Hugo all night. Methinks he said, before leaving, that a spark of life yet remained. Mistress Volga has never left his side, calling his name to bring him back to life. I also saw her try to get him to swallow the leech's medicine."

Conrad, where he lay, had a clear view of the room, and in the increasing light saw everything as Kurt had described it, while in the depths of his sad heart he sympathized with Volga in the hopelessness of her efforts.

The leech again entered the room. Stepping softly to Conrad's side and examining him critically, he pro-



The reaction being too great for Volga, she burst into an uncontrollable flood of tears.



nounced him to be out of immediate danger. Then turning to Volga, who sat immovable, her eyes riveted on the beloved features lying cold and still before her, he said: "While there is but a little life, there's hope. Hast thou succeeded in getting him to swallow?"

"I have made ceaseless attempts," feebly answered the girl, "all in vain!"

"Then let us take some of the witch's mixture, to which I will add a few drops of my own elixir, and make another trial," said the leech. "I will help thee!"

They had been working with the patient for more than an hour with no apparent success, when a very slight tremor seemed to pervade his entire frame.

Finally, and by almost a miracle, the stricken youth actually swallowed a goodly quantity of the potion. "Thanks be to our Good Lady," whispered the reverend leech, "there is more hope now! Take courage!"

The reaction being too great for Volga, she burst into an uncontrollable flood of tears. In a few moments she was herself a proper subject for the leech's kindly attention. Begging her to lie down and rest, he promised to call her as soon as her services were required.

The Duke, who had been a silent witness of the foregoing, now came up to Conrad. Extending his hand, he said: "I am rejoiced to see thee gaining strength. Thou, my Conrad, art all that is now left to

me, and to her who gave life to the dear departed one. If the shock does not kill her, thou must try to get well for her sake as well as mine."

"I cannot say that I have any desire to live," answered Conrad, faintly. "The wish of my heart is to follow Ursula."

"Conrad," said the Duke, "Ursula died for thee that thou mightest live. It is then only thy duty to wish to remain with us until God calls thee in his own good time to join her who, in loving thee and dying for thee, gave thee a beautiful example of self-sacrifice. The leech has just informed me that he will remove thee and Hugo to better quarters in the monastery. Promise me to husband thy strength, and to use all means toward thy recovery, that thou may'st supply the place in her aging parents' hearts once filled by Ursula."

Conrad looked at the sad countenance of his noble friend. Deeply moved, he gave him the desired promise.

The brave old Abbot now put in an appearance, clad once more in the garb of his order. He seemed very lame, while a shade of pallor overspread his rubicund visage. On being asked if he, too, had been wounded, he replied in the negative; but stated that he felt somewhat sore and tired by reason of his unusual exercise the day before. Turning to Conrad, he said: "I have come to see how thou and Hugo are this morn-

ing; and to tell thee that thou art to be moved within the next two hours to the best room in the monastery. When I get thee there, good, brave Sir Knight, I shall nurse thee with my own hands, and mind that thou dost what I tell thee!"

Conrad smiled faintly, pressing the Abbot's hand with trembling fingers.

The old prelate then hobbled over to the Duke. In a few touching words he expressed his deep sympathy at his sad loss. "I have sore limbs and sinews today, my lord," he added, "but they don't count for anything. May God forgive me for having slain so many human beings yesterday; but may He also accept my thanks for permitting me, for one day, to be a soldier again, and to do a soldier's duty. Today I am once more a man of peace, ready to do deeds of peace, such as tending the sick and wounded, before I attempt to nurse my own aching limbs." The Duke could not repress a sad smile at his old friend's quaint humor.

"I do not wonder, holy father," said he, "that thou art lame and stiff after thy tremendous exertions of yesterday; but how such a bloodthirsty being as thou didst prove thyself can fill the quiet and peaceful place of a sick-nurse, puzzles me."

"That furious warrior, my lord," answered the prelate, with the old twinkle in his eyes, "was my other self. What that other self does, my real self is not al-

ways responsible for. This, our young wounded knight here knows; but, seriously, my lord, tell me how fares the young Count of Waldhorst. Is it true that he has nearly come to life again?"

"It would seem so," answered Duke Henry. "The leech appears to have hope now. With such a faithful nurse as Volga, he may yet recover."

"She is a brave, good girl, that niece of mine," said his reverence. "I am proud of her; and hope for her sake that the young man, who, I see plainly, holds the place in her heart of both brother and lover, may live."

Toward evening Conrad was placed on a stretcher for removal to the monastery. Before leaving he was carried to Hugo's side. Glancing at him for a moment, he whispered into Volga's ear words of encouragement. He was then taken slowly to the couch on which lay in all her regal stateliness the magnificent form of his dead love. Gazing for a while at the beautiful smile which still hovered about the sweet lips, he cried in the agony of despair: "Never, never again in this world, shall I see thee, Ursula, my love!" He hid his convulsed face in his trembling hands, until the kind voice of the Duke gently roused him.

"My poor son," said he, "even in the sorrow of my own sore bereavement, my heart bleeds for thee. Promise me that as soon as thou art well enough to leave thy bed, thou wilt come to Falkenstein. My

home hereafter is thy home. All that is mine will be thine some day. Fare thee well, my noble Conrad. I shall give thy love to Ursula's mother, and tell her that thou wilt be a son to her."

"Yes, a son," softly said our hero, "but without the real right to the name of which cruel fate has deprived me. I would live only in memory of Ursula. In doing so, I shall find solace in the love and companionship of her beloved father and mother."

The older knight pressed the hand of the younger and turned away.

On his way to the monastery, Conrad was overtaken by Volga, who whispered excitedly in his ear that Hugo had just taken another potion, and for the first time since he was wounded a faint color of life seemed to have returned to his face. "We shall be with thee at the monastery in a few days. I must tell thee, also," she added, "that our kind and generous friend, the Duke, wishes me to bring Hugo to Falkenstein as soon as he is well enough to make the journey. So thou seest, dear Conrad, that we shall be together again, if—if only—Hugo recovers!"

"God grant that he may!" said Conrad, softly. "Hugo is very dear to me, dearer than ever now, and so art thou, my brave companion of many dangers; I pray thee, therefore, do not overtax thy strength. Wilt thou promise me this?"

"I promise!" said Volga, smiling through her tears.

The saddest duty of all yet remained to the sorrowing Duke. He departed for Falkenstein, taking with him the body of Ursula. He arrived at the castle the third day after the fatal battle, the Duchess meanwhile having been apprised of their irreparable loss. That noble invalid seemed to bear her sorrow better than he had anticipated, frequently asserting that she had many a time feared that Ursula, with all her spirit, was too pure and good to remain long in this world. Now that she was gone, her example of heroic and perfect womanhood had made her death more beautiful than she could ever have imagined. The funeral took place two weeks before the twenty-second anniversary of the Princess' birthday; on which day, it had been understood of late, she was to have wedded Conrad von Rheinstein.

From far and near, rich and poor, young and old, came to pay their last tribute to the memory of one who had been a benefactor to all and universally beloved.

A week later, Wolfram, the devoted minstrel, stood alone for a long time in deep meditation at the grave of the only woman he had ever loved. He there came to the conclusion that he could now, better perhaps than had she lived, make her truly his own, in thought and in song.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE ACTS OF A REFRACTORY PATIENT.

"You may as well
Forbid the sea for to obey the moon,
As, or by oath, remove or counsel, shake
The fabric of his folly."
—*Shaks. Winter's Tale.*

At the monastery, in a bright, sunny chamber overlooking the river, nursed alternately by the Abbot and Kurt, lay Conrad. Kurt had grown very dear to him; while the boy, since the death of his mistress, also clung to his master apparently with his very life. He had adored Ursula, worshiping her after his boyish fashion; but now that she had forever vanished, he seemed to have aged, caring for no one save his ideal knight, the nearest and dearest to her. He related to him many details of her life at Falkenstein, speaking particularly of her anxiety after her repeated failures to relieve her father and lover at Waldhorst.

Conrad listened with mournfully absorbing interest to all that Kurt had to say; and learned to know by little things which he alone understood how truly Ursula had loved and missed him.

One day he told Kurt of the forebodings which had possessed her, on seeing from the convent window the year before the ground covered with withered leaves. Strange and unaccountable as this mood had always seemed to Conrad, he now learned from Kurt that frequently in his absence, on her return from missions of charity, she would stop Saladin, gazing dreamily and sadly into the far distance. At such times her eyes would fill with tears. These melancholy fits never lasted long, however, as she generally galloped home, apparently in good spirits.

For a week, affairs at the monastic hospital were uneventful. Conrad slowly but steadily improved; while Hugo, under the care of the indefatigable Volga, still hovered between life and death. The leech divided his time between them, wondering at the endurance of the girl, who had all her life been accustomed to outdoor exercise.

During three days of watching and praying by the bedside of the only one she had ever loved, Volga had grown into womanhood. When she thought him dead, she had then realized how dear Hugo was to her; and now that her care and devotion had actually brought him back to life, she fully understood the power and depth of her love.

When at last, on the eighth day, he opened his eyes with a kindly look of recognition, she fell on her knees

by his bedside, and hiding her face in her hands, relieved her overburdened heart with joyous weeping. That night she retired to rest for the first time since her arrival at the monastery.

Conrad, too, was now rapidly recovering. The Abbot often entertained him with anecdotes of his early adventures and battles in which he had been engaged, years before, with the father of Prince Steffel. "No better man," he said, "than his son."

Speaking of that time, one day, he added: "I then wore the same armor and used the identical battle-axe which did me such good service in the late defense of Grunau. But thou hast no idea, my young friend, how I suffered after that desperate fight. I did not say much about it; but the way my bones and muscles ached after being squeezed for twenty-four hours for the first time in twenty years, in that old suit of mail, I will leave thee to imagine."

"Thou forgettest, reverend father," interposed Conrad, "that thou didst wear it on one occasion in that ghastly banquet hall, as the spectre of thy twin brother."

"As I told thee, young sir, what I or what my spectre wore, does not count; I spoke of the time," added he, with the same old mischievous smile, "even I was as gay and as much alive, if not as handsome, a young knight as thou art; or rather, I should say, as

thou wert before being laid low in this abominable manner."

"Thou wert as much alive as any on that fatal though victorious day, with thy ponderous battle-axe," suggested Conrad, "and it is a wonder to me that thou wert not wounded, like Hugo and me. How is that poor lad? As bad as ever?"

"No, I rejoice to tell thee he is better," said the Abbot. "I forgot to mention it before. The crisis seems to have passed. He opened his eyes this morning and recognized Volga."

Conrad was overjoyed. Feeling stronger than he had yet done, he, with the help of his reverence, now partly dressed himself and took a seat near the window.

As he drank in the exhilarating air on the balmy spring day, noting, as he had done one short year before, the sunlight, "dancing on the river," the zest of life, which had well-nigh left him, seemed partially to return. Listening to the love songs of the birds, and inhaling the fragrance ot the budding trees, a picture of himself, drifting down that same river with Duke Henry and Rosalie, rose vividly before him. He recalled their landing at yonder bower and his walk to and from the Convent of St. Agnes. Finally, the last scene between Rosalie and himself, when he promised faithfully to call for her at the end of her trial year, pre-

sented itself distinctly to his mind. He felt as though he were awaking from a dream, yet the old scenes failed to arouse any emotion within his lacerated heart.

Having lost all reckoning as to time, he asked the Benedictine the day of the month. The Abbot gave him the desired information, and at the same time reminded him that it was time for him to return to bed.

Conrad obeyed; but his thoughts were too busy for him to sleep. The time to fulfill his promise to Rosalie was near at hand. "Of course," murmured he, "it is out of the question for me to think of leaving my sick-room, therefore I will send word to Rosalie to await my recovery at the convent; or else, should it be necessary for her to leave sooner, to proceed to Falkenstein under proper escort. Meanwhile I shall confer with the Duke."

Accordingly, when the Abbot paid his usual visit, Conrad requested him to send a message forthwith to the Duke to ascertain his pleasure regarding Rosalie; also to go himself to the Abbess that very afternoon to arrange everything for the girl's departure.

The good prelate went immediately as desired, leaving our hero to his thoughts. On his return, he found him again seated at the open window. Scolding him right sharply for his imprudence, he ordered him back to bed.

Seating himself in a comfortable chair, the Abbot began as follows: "I am sorry to tell thee, good Sir Knight, that I could make no arrangements whatever to take Rosalie from the convent."

Looking up in surprise, Conrad asked what his reverence meant.

"I mean that we are too late."

"Too late?" echoed Conrad, sitting up in bed.

"Lie down, sir!" commanded the Abbot; "it is unwise for thee to sit up in that excited state. Yes, we are too late! The report that thou, the Princess, Hugo and even I, had been killed at the ruins reached the convent two weeks ago. That was within three days of the time in which Rosalie, of her own free will, was to decide whether or not she would take the veil. The Abbess must have verified the sad tidings; and this, in all probability, hastened the poor girl's decision to become a nun."

"Go on!" said Conrad, "let me hear all."

"Go on?" repeated the Abbot, "there is nothing to go on with, save that the young damsel has entered her last week of probation before taking her vows, during which she is allowed to speak to no one, except the nuns having her in charge. She is completely excluded from the world. In three days she will be shut out from it forever."

"But," asked Conrad, greatly excited, "didst thou

not tell the Abbess that both Hugo and I were alive? and did she not see for herself that thou, as well, art very much so?"

"She must have known it all," answered the Abbot, "but kept it from Rosalie, in order not to prevent her decision at the last moment."

Conrad, out of patience, again sat up in bed, exclaiming, "Am I to understand, holy father, that even now, if Rosalie should hear of her brother's and my convalescence, she would not retrace her step or change her resolution?"

"That is precisely the situation," replied the Abbot; "or, more properly speaking, if she now should hear of it, which is well-nigh impossible, and wish to change, she could not. The laws of the convent are very strict, and in accordance with the direct edicts of His Holiness, the Pope."

"Nonsense!" exclaimed our hero. "Confound such laws! They are both arbitrary and unjustifiable. I myself would like nothing better than to break them!"

"A very wicked thought, my young friend," replied the Abbot. "Thou must not talk in this excited way again. It can do no possible good, and may bring on a relapse. Lie down and compose thyself."

Conrad threw himself back on his pillow, pondering over the matter in deep thought, the Abbot watching him curiously the while. At length Conrad re-

sumed: "I have thought it over, holy father, and have concluded that since it seems I must live, contrary to my desire, the sooner I get well the better. Therefore I shall try to sleep."

The good man, much relieved, heartily applauded this resolution. As he had other duties to perform, he left his patient with the parting injunction to keep quiet. As soon, however, as he had closed the door behind him, Conrad summoned Kurt. In a whisper, he bade him find out from some source, possibly the Abbot's servants, at what hour the nuns at the convent went for their daily devotions in the chapel, which he knew to be situated in the rear of the main buildings. "Be careful," he added, "that not a word of this reaches the Abbot's ears!"

The boy, as we know, had ere this time been frequently entrusted with important errands; so seeming clearly to understand his master's object, he started on his confidential mission without delay.

A moment later Conrad, hardly knowing what he was doing, rose without assistance. In trying to stand, he was compelled to lay hold on the chair beside his bed for support. After a short pause, he made a step forward, finally managing to walk the entire length of the room; but in his efforts to return, dizziness attacked him. He nearly fell to the floor before reaching the bed. He was none too quick in scrambling be-

neath the covering, as the Abbot suddenly re-entered bringing the patient's supper, remarking as he set it down that he had seen Kurt go out, but he knew not whither.

"The poor lad, tired of monastic life, has, I suppose, gone for a little stroll," stammered Conrad, still short of breath by reason of his unwonted exertion, while the tell-tale flush in his face attracted the Abbot's scrutiny. He forbore questioning him, however, in his astonishment at the increased appetite of his patient, who ate as he had not done since his illness began.

Luckily, Kurt did not return during the Abbot's visit; so that instead of being scolded as he might have been, to avert suspicion, he was commended highly for bringing the desired information. After a restless night, Conrad rose early, and with Kurt's assistance, completely dressed himself. Having disposed of his breakfast, he crossed the room leaning on the boy's shoulder. After that he took his seat at the open window. There the Abbot found him, and was so amazed that he stared at him in perfect wonder, being, the while, absolutely speechless.

"I slept so well," said our hero, with a reckless handling of the truth, "that I felt sufficiently strong this morning to dress myself; and as I have just enjoyed a good breakfast, thought a little fresh air would be beneficial to me. If thou, reverend sir, wilt give me thy

strong arm, I will try to take my first steps across the room."

The good Benedictine, with many misgivings, reluctantly extended his arm to his refractory patient, saying: "I am afraid, my young friend, that thou art overdoing things; though I must confess that for a first trial after having been so long in bed, thy step is wondrous firm."

"Let me remind thee, holy father, of my resolution to get well as soon as possible," answered Conrad. As he said this smilingly, he looked so well with his heightened color that the old monk's fears were allayed; so he contented himself with once more admonishing his patient to be careful and moderate as to his exercises. That afternoon Conrad put a further test upon his strength by strolling through his room with Kurt walking by his side but without leaning upon him.

When the leech called that evening he found his patient feverish; but as his wounds were well-nigh healed and his appetite excellent, he felt no further anxiety; so, with instructions to restrict him in his walking for at least another fortnight, he left him to the care of his two nurses. These injunctions were as nothing to Conrad, whose plan of future action, leech or no leech, had been clearly marked out in his mind.

The morning following was the last before that on which Rosalie was to take the veil. Dressing himself carefully for the first time since his illness, Conrad walked alone up and down for a few minutes before breakfast. When the Abbot joined him, he pretended to be too much fatigued to take his usual exercise. Not without misgivings did the prelate leave the sick chamber to officiate at early mass, making up his mind to watch his patient more closely for a time.

Hardly had the sound of his reverence's footsteps died away, when Conrad donned his warm jacket and cloak, picked up a stout stick to support himself, and with a doubtful smile on his pallid face, told Kurt that he would go out for a short walk in the garden.

"Very well, Sir Knight," said the boy; "I shall tell the Abbot when he comes," well knowing he was helping to get his master into a scrape.

As Conrad stepped out he saw a Benedictine brother. Hailing him, he requested him to lead him through the underground passage to the ruins. At first the monk remonstrated; but after a while, on a promise that it should not reach the Abbot's ears, he was persuaded to support the invalid through the long corridor to the well-remembered banquet hall.

On looking around him, Conrad discovered unmistakable signs of growing decay. The portrait of the late master of Grunau was split in two right through

the middle. The two couches on which the living and the dead had respectively lain were still there, looking neglected and desolate. Well might the young knight linger, as memory conjured up the face of the Princess, with all the stirring incidents of her last fatal day. Not until her parting words came forcibly back to him, among them, "Thou must live and be happy; remember Rosalie," did he recollect that he had ventured out that morning at the last moment, at the risk of health and possibly life, to rescue this girl from a living tomb. Hurriedly resuming his way out of the ruins, he crossed the highway and entered the woods opposite; nor did he stop again until he found himself before the wall of the convent grounds, not far from the chapel whose towers were visible above the trees. Firmly bracing his stick against the wall, he placed one foot on the handle, made a spring, and grasping the coping with both hands, drew himself up; then quietly let himself down on the inside.

This feat, an easy one at ordinary times, proved almost too much for him, for a sharp pain in his shoulder, and a warm, trickling down his sleeve, told him that one of his wounds had opened afresh.

Right before him, almost level with the ground, was a long colonnade connecting the convent with the chapel, through which he knew Rosalie must pass. He gave no further thought to his wound, but crept

up behind the intervening bushes, close to this passage-way. Hardly had he stopped when the silvery tones of a bell startled him. His heart, weakened by his long illness, began to beat excitedly in anticipation. Nor did he have long to wait. In the silence following the tolling of the bell, a procession of nuns, their hands folded across their breasts, and eyes turned to the ground, stepped out of the convent in double file, with four single heavily veiled figures in their center. From his hiding place Conrad thought he recognized in the second novice the graceful form of young Rosalie; but before he could make up his mind how to act, the procession had passed him and entered the chapel.

Nearly an hour elapsed before the warning tones of the bell notified him that they were about to reappear. In the meanwhile, he had crossed the colonnade into the shade, choosing a position behind a large tree against which he leaned for support.

As the bell's last vibrations died away, the nuns emerged from the chapel, re-entering the passage in the same order as before. Conrad had eyes only for the four central figures. As they drew near, he was convinced that the one he had thought Rosalie was indeed she. Stepping boldly from behind the tree and ascending two steps to the colonnade, he stretched out his hand toward her, calling out, "Rosalie, come to thy

comrade! Didst think me dead or that I had forgotten thee?"

The figure thus addressed staggered backward, sinking into the arms of the nuns behind her, while the entire procession seemed horror-stricken, as though some wild beast had appeared amongst them, instead of a pale, handsome young knight.

Rosalie, who had believed Conrad dead, for the moment actually thought him an apparition; but when in her half consciousness she heard the beloved voice, and opening her eyes with a wild look, saw her hero standing before her, she quickly disengaged herself from the nuns. Throwing aside her veil she rushed into his outstretched arms. As she did so, the nun's cap fell back, releasing her luxuriant hair, of which she would have been shorn in the morning, which fell, not only over her own shoulders, but partly covered those of her beloved knight. The scandalized nuns rushed screaming loudly into the convent. Rosalie found herself alone with Conrad, who, in an almost fainting condition, seated himself on the colonnade steps.

Absolutely beside herself with joy, the faithful girl knelt before him. Raising her head, and gazing at him with fond delight, she said: "It is, indeed, thou, my beloved knight! Hast thou come for thy little girl at last; thou, whom I had thought dead and gone forever?"



"Wilt thou take me to Falkenstein, Conrad, and may I always remain near thee?"



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Conrad, inexpressibly touched by such emotion, tenderly raised her and made her sit beside him.

Looking at her attentively, he marked the growth of gentle refinement which education and intercourse with the Abbess had imparted to her countenance, the which, surrounded by her wealth of hair, made a vision calculated to act as a soothing balm to any lacerated heart. Taking her hand in his, he continued to gaze on her loveliness. Rosalie, who met his glance with frank, beaming eyes, asked suddenly: "Wilt thou take me to Falkenstein, Conrad, and may I always remain near thee?"

This appeal went straight to the young knight's heart. "I shall take thee to thy new home as soon as I can undertake the journey," he answered.

"I knew it," she exclaimed, excitedly. If thou wilt but take me where thou art, I shall be happy; but," she added, suddenly observing his pallor, "thou art ill—hast been sorely wounded? Poor Conrad! And Hugo, my brother, is dead! Ursula, thy love, dead also! Alas! Alas! poor Conrad!"

"Hugo is not dead," replied our hero. "Volga's tender devotion and almost superhuman efforts have brought him back to life. Ursula? Yes, she——." Here Conrad, who had been talking and listening entirely oblivious to everything else, came to a sudden stop, interrupted by the unexpected approach of the

Abbess, who confronted him with an angry glance, followed by a compassionate look toward Rosalie.

"How darest thou, Sir Knight!" she said sternly, "How darest thou outrage our holy order by trespassing on these sacred grounds? This makes thee liable to dire punishment by the Church of Rome. How canst thou answer before God for having drawn this innocent girl, on the very threshold of a life of holy seclusion from worldly temptation, back to this life of misery? Moreover thou art not worthy to step into her life, plighted as thou wert in wedlock to the Princess Ursula, who, alas! has been taken from us!"

Conrad, being too weak to rise, apologized to the Abbess for the omission, saying: "I am sorry for having intruded upon these sacred grounds, holy mother, but the urgency of the case could bode no delay. I knew and loved this child like my own sister before I had ever seen the Princess. I have come as her protector to claim her according to an agreement. I know full well that had not she believed both her brother and me to be dead, she would never have decided to take the veil; so I rose from my sick-bed to rescue her at the last hour from the consequences of a step she would have taken under a mistake. I have no other excuse to offer."

"Thou sayest," retorted the Abbess, less sternly, "that thou didst love this child before ever thou hadst

seen the Princess? Thou didst not love Ursula then?"

"I loved her with all my heart," replied the knight, unabashed. "How could I help loving one so noble, beautiful and good? She was a veritable angel! Had she lived, my life had been devoted to her to the end, notwithstanding the affection I felt for this sweet child."

"I must say," replied the Abbess, looking doubtfully at Conrad, "I do not understand such feelings. Dost thou, Rosalie?"

"I do, holy mother," answered the girl, with one of her tender smiles. "I saw the beautiful Princess once, as thou knowest, and shall never forget her. I would cheerfully have renounced ever seeing Knight Conrad for her sake, notwithstanding my great love for him. Thou seest, dear, kind mother, I do understand his feelings perfectly."

The stern brow of the Abbess relaxed. She had loved Rosalie better than any of her pupils of that year. Unsophisticated as she herself was in the ways of the world, the good old lady could not help recalling the time when in her youth she, too, had been disappointed in love. She kissed Rosalie, saying: "I cannot be angry with thee, my child. May God and the Blessed Virgin forgive me if I do wrong in my lenience to thee! As thou and this daring young knight seem to understand each other so well, perhaps it will be best for the

happiness of both to remain together. Go to him, Rosalie! Take her, Conrad von Rheinstein," she added, in a trembling voice, "and make her happy!"

These words plainly implied more than our hero had thought of. With all his gallantry, the idea of Rosalie's assuming the place of the woman he had adored had never once entered his head. He meant, however, to continue her affectionate friend and protector. So rising, with her assistance, he placed his arms around her, and facing the Abbess, said: "I shall devote my life to her happiness."

"I am inclined to believe thee," replied she, her heart being completely softened on noticing the feeble state in which the gallant youth had ventured forth; "and I sincerely hope ye will be good to each other. I forgive thee everything, Rosalie; but thy return to the convent, even for one moment, is out of the question. I shall have to consign thee at once to the care of the young knight. Thy wearing apparel, which came from Falkenstein a year ago, I shall send to the Abbot this afternoon. And now I will accompany ye both to the gate."

She kissed Rosalie farewell, blessed both her and Conrad and returned to her living tomb. Her heart had been unusually stirred, having heard and seen more of the ways of the world in the last half hour than during the twenty long years passed within its walls.

As soon as the garden gate was closed, to the girl's great delight, Conrad felt obliged to lean on her for support. They returned to the monastery by the river path, along which they had walked together, for the first time, on that day one year before. From afar off they espied the Abbot, who, in turn, recognizing Conrad, the refractory patient he was in search of, and Rosalie, in the girl at his side, stood still for a moment in utter astonishment. Then running to meet them as fast as his gouty legs would carry him, and out of breath, he called out: "A nice business this! What hast thou been about, young sir, sneaking out of thy room when thou shouldst have been in bed? This may be thy death," he added, puffing, blowing and mopping his brow; "and how darest thou abduct this young girl from the convent?"

"I feel too weak, reverend sir, to answer," replied Conrad; but I would thank thee to support me on my other side. I am afraid I shall never get up that hill."

"I should think not," answered the monk, somewhat softened by the appeal, giving his willing arm to the almost fainting man. "Rosalie and I will support thee as far as the gate; and from there I shall have thee carried back to bed, though thou dost not deserve it!"

With assistance soon obtained, the now seemingly penitent patient was carried the rest of the way.

Rosalie, in her convent attire, her hair once more pushed back underneath her cap, was allowed to remain with Volga to help nurse Hugo and Conrad. The next morning the latter grew hourly worse. The Abbot becoming alarmed, had a consultation with the leech, which resulted in their leaving the principal care of the patient to Rosalie's tender hands with Kurt's assistance. For the next few days, however, it mattered little whose hands administered to his wants, as he recognized no one, not even the sweet nurse at his side.

When Rosalie arrived at the monastery, she had found her brother lying speechless, though conscious. She felt cheered, however, by hopeful words from Volga. Three days later she was called by the excited girl to his bedside, he having spoken, making some inquiries regarding the Princess Ursula, which his devoted nurse dared not answer. As Conrad's fever had left him that day and he had fallen asleep, she resigned him to Kurt's care, and answered her sister's summons. With a quiet, gentle voice she gradually detailed to Hugo all the sad circumstances of Ursula's untimely death, of which she had heard from Kurt since her arrival at the monastery. She ended by telling him how long he himself had been at death's door, and that only Volga's devotion had brought him back to life.

Varied emotions played over his pale face as he listened to her recital. There was a long silence.

Presently he asked Rosalie to kiss him—Volga standing at the foot of the bed, noting every expression in Hugo's face. Meeting his look, she blushed, and turned to walk toward the window to hide the tears which were fast welling up into her eyes. He waited thoughtfully for a few moments, then called Volga to his bedside. Quickly drying her tears, she came to him.

"Wilt thou, too, kiss me?" he asked.

Without answering, she regarded him with compressed lips. "Wilt thou kiss me," he repeated, "if I tell thee how dear thou art to me; dearer than I ever thought thou wouldst be?"

"No, Hugo!" she answered, "not until I know more."

Stooping down she pressed her lips to his thin hand, and returned to the window.

He did not try to detain her; but turning to his sister, whispered that ere long all would be understood between him and the dear girl who had nursed him so devotedly. Rosalie pressed her brother's hand in answer, returning to Conrad with a lighter heart.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE ORPHAN ASYLUM OF THE DUKE OF FALKENSTEIN.

"Here too dwells simple trust; plain innocence;
Unsullied beauty; sound unbroken youth."

—*Thompson.*

A few days after the scene last described, Hugo made a full confession to Volga of his infatuation for Ursula, whom he had seen but once in his life. He acknowledged that in dying to save Conrad's life, she proved that she could never have cared for him, nor could she have been anything to him had she lived. Yet it was even a more difficult task to convince Volga than to assure himself of the love he felt for her whom, from their earliest childhood, he had regarded as a sister. When at last she listened to him, and he learned fully to understand her loving heart—how she had nursed him with a devotion which could not be equaled, in fact, bringing him back to life from well-nigh actual death, he wondered that a thought of any other woman, even Ursula, could ever have had a place in his heart.

If there was a happy girl in the world at this time, it was Volga.

Three long months thus elapsed, which under different circumstances would have been tedious indeed. Hugo at last felt strong enough to undertake the journey to Falkenstein, in response to repeated messages from its loving inmates.

But to go back to Conrad.

Two months before Hugo's departure, he and Rosalie left the monastery, accompanied by Kurt and an escort, the brave old Abbot waving them a last farewell. As Conrad entered the well-remembered road to Falkenstein, he pointed out to Rosalie the places of interest to him in the past, and as toward night they rode through the village, he told her of his first meeting with Ursula. Soon after, they rode through the lower gate of the fortress, ascended the hill, crossed the drawbridge and reached the palace, where their devoted friends, the Duke and Duchess, to the unspeakable delight of the grateful girl, received them with open arms.

Bernard von Wolfram, who had restored and was occupying his ancestral castle, came early next morning to welcome Conrad and to have his first look at Count Hans' daughter, the girl of whom Ursula had spoken to him so fondly. The minstrel was immediately attracted by her modest, childlike bearing.

When he perceived her readiness to talk of the dead Princess, now more than ever his life's idol and the subject of his song, his heart went out to the fair young orphan, who soon became aware that she had made a true friend in the minstrel knight.

The freedom of her new surroundings enabled Conrad to note with pleasure her improvement in culture and understanding, as well as the other charms which go to make attractive womanhood. Among these, her singing gave them all the greatest surprise. One evening while all were seated together, she treated them unexpectedly to one of Ursula's beautiful compositions, which had been secretly obtained from the Duchess, and in a short time thoroughly mastered by the gifted songstress.

One can imagine the tender feelings awakened in each breast as the voice of the beloved dead seemed to be repeated and re-echoed in the living and thrilling tones of Rosalie. As they fell upon his ears Wolfram sat entranced and spellbound. He listened with forced composure to the end; then, no longer able to control his emotion, rose hurriedly, pressed his lips to Rosalie's hand in silence, and withdrew. The younger knight's face, also so visibly betrayed the tumultuous working of his heart, that the girl came to him in alarm, saying:

"What ails thee, Conrad, and why did our friend, the minstrel, leave us so suddenly?"

"I know not, dear Rosalie," answered the young knight, "unless it be that thy beautiful song has awakened the same recollections and emotions in his heart as in mine; for thy exquisite voice indeed affected me strangely. Wolfram, you must know, has for years loved Ursula devotedly."

"If my songs sadden thee," said the girl, tenderly, "I shall sing no more;" at the same time placing her soft hand on his.

"Such emotions as these," replied Conrad, "are the greatest boon to a sorrowing heart. Sing to me, dear one, her songs as well as thine own, and talk to me of her if thou wilt, I shall only love thee the better for so doing."

Rosalie, answering him with a gentle smile, observed the Duchess holding out to her both her trembling and transparent hands. Without hesitation she rushed into her tender arms. The good lady pressed her to her heart, which example was warmly followed by the Duke, who then placed the delighted girl between them.

Wolfram re-entered the room and advanced toward Rosalie, exclaiming that he had never heard a more beautiful and soul-stirring voice; and that, if she wished, he would gladly teach her other songs of Ur-

sula's, as well as accompany her. Rosalie, in her bewitching, unaffected way, expressed her grateful appreciation of both his praise and offer, and furthermore asked the favor that he would sing to her. The minstrel complied with the request, remarking how sad was the comparison between his worn tenor voice, and the fresh and rich tones they had just heard. Rosalie, who as yet knew but little of minstrelsy, grew intensely interested in Wolfram's ballads. She sang with him and made him accompany her from that day. With double pleasure she looked forward to the arrival of his white-haired teacher, Roland, who had been invited by the Duke to visit Falkenstein.

It was touching to see the affection bestowed on Conrad and Rosalie by the Duke and Duchess. The former was so connected with the memory of their daughter that he would naturally come in for his share. Rosalie, however, took them by storm, not only on account of her personal charms, but equally those of mind and heart. As she so often alluded to Ursula, she by degrees occupied the daughter's place in the thoughts and affections of the bereaved couple.

When Hugo brought Volga to Falkenstein he presented her to his benefactors as his affianced wife. The sincere brotherly affection manifested toward the young couple by Conrad, drew them daily closer to that tender-hearted invalid, the Duchess.

When later on our hero told her of the young forester's unexpressed love for Ursula, she from that moment gave the youth a permanent place in her motherly heart.

As time wore on, Conrad was obliged to confess to himself that Rosalie was becoming more and more dear to him. Her heart, he well knew, was already his, having been convinced of it by a thousand sweet, natural signs. He loved her no less truly, and delighted in her companionship.

The Ducal pair had perceived this growing affection, as had also Rosalie herself. Although Conrad had not yet breathed a word of it, she read his heart and was thrilled with joy. Her step was more elastic. Her voice sang gaily through the halls of the castle. Her exuberance of spirits was contagious. The long winter nights had come, during which her cheering presence shed its brightness on all. The Duke and Duchess, suspecting the delicacy which, under the circumstances, kept Conrad silent, themselves opened the subject one day, assuring him that nothing would make them happier, now that their daughter was no more, than to see him take for his wife one whose bright presence had done so much to lighten their sorrow.

As he received this unexpected encouragement, Conrad quietly bowed his head, kissed the Duchess' hand, and stood awaiting the coming of Rosalie, who

entered almost at the moment. He met her at the door and clasped the astonished girl in his arms, impressing one long and lingering kiss on her lips. She felt instinctively the difference between this demonstration of affection and the calm, brotherly embraces of former days. When he released her, she hesitated a moment in her surprise; then throwing her arms around his neck, returned his kiss with her whole heart and soul.

From her hero she ran to her benefactors. Embracing them both, she took her now accustomed seat between them. The expression in her lovely face under this new-found happiness was so charming as to complete the fascination of the old couple. At their words of open admiration and praise she blushed deeply, and hurriedly rising, rushed out of the room, followed by Conrad.

When they were alone the spell of silence which had so far held them was effectually broken. How much was to be told, and what important revelations made, we leave our readers to imagine. Conrad did not forget Ursula, nor did Rosalie. They agreed to live to her memory, and to devote themselves to the happiness of her father and mother; "and also to each other's happiness," added Rosalie, archly.

"Yes, thou little witch! and to each other's happiness also," repeated Conrad, smiling as of old.

During the stormy, wintry weather that followed, Wolfram accompanied Hugo and Volga on nearly every ride, while Conrad, knowing the location of the poor through his former visits with Ursula, continued at the side of his newly betrothed, to dispense the charities of the Duchess. Kurt, who never failed to be with his master and his pretty little mistress, as he called Rosalie, on all these expeditions, remained within the castle a privileged page.

One evening as they all sat together enjoying the warmth from the huge fire-place at Falkenstein, Conrad ventured the remark that it seemed to him as if through the kindness of the Duke and Duchess the castle had become a veritable place of refuge for the fatherless and motherless. "We are all orphans here," he said, "Hugo, Volga, Rosalie and I; without a home or castle other than that provided by you, our noble, generous benefactors."

"What has been destroyed can be rebuilt," said the Duke; "but what those two damsels yonder, with their heads close together, are talking about, I should like to know."

"I think," said Wolfram, "they are discussing another orphan, namely myself, who spends so much time at this, thy asylum, noble Duke, that he might be counted one of its inmates as well. I told these young girls tonight that I am about making a tour,

with my lyre, through the principal capitals of Southern Germany, to enlighten their inhabitants concerning the glorious deeds of our departed Princess and those of her two noble knights, Conrad and Hugo."

"Not leaving out thyself, I hope," interposed the Duke.

"When I sing of my own prowess," replied the minstrel, "I do so as a nameless knight, but when I sing of the dead and lost I call her and those who fought for her so nobly by their true names. One of these, our young Count Hugo here, I have made my heir. If I do not return all my estate will belong to him and his future wife."

"Thou art indeed a true and generous friend!" exclaimed Volga, rushing to embrace him.

"A friend to us all," said the Duke. "I trust that we shall see thee back again before the end of the year; for without thee, we cannot count our home circle complete."

"I well know where my heart will long to be," replied the minstrel. "I shall probably return next year in time for the chase, which, in the comradeship of that expert young huntress, Volga, I shall enjoy as never before."

Two days later, mounted on a white charger, Knight Wolfram, in the garb of a wandering minstrel, lyre in hand, and without attendance, left his castle. As he



As he wound around the proud Castle of Falkenstein.



wound around the hill, on which rose the proud Castle of Falkenstein, he saluted its inmates, who were watching his departure from one of the lookouts on the battlements, surrounding the well-remembered arena.

One morning a great commotion was occasioned among the inmates of Falkenstein by the arrival of an old friend whom they had long thought dead; no less a person than Henry the guide, accompanied by a little girl. In answer to their eager inquiries he told them that Prince Steffel had spared his life when the other prisoners at Waldhorst were put to the sword, recognizing in him the famous guide and thinking he might prove useful some future day.

After the Prince's defeat and death he had managed to make his escape. Remaining on his charcoal settlement until the death of his widowed sister, he had finally decided to seek the Duke with his little orphan niece, the only one left to him in the world.

"Another orphan!" whispered Conrad to Hugo, who had just joined them.

"I am glad to see thee again, my companion in suffering," said Duke Henry, "and if thou art willing to remain with us, thou mayst enter my service from this day."

The Guide was overjoyed at this offer, particularly as the Duke allowed his little girl to remain with him.

At the request of the Duke, Hugo and Conrad vis-

ited Waldhorst in the autumn. They found nought but desolate ruins. The towers and battlements had fallen into the courtyard, filling up the dry moat. The drawbridge lay charred and broken. Hugo felt as Conrad had done on visiting the ruins of his ancestral castle on the Rhine. As the latter had sought his mother's grave, so the young Count made his way to that of both his father and mother. They found it surrounded by many mounds, thrown over the remains of the murdered prisoners of Waldhorst. While viewing these monuments of man's dastardly cruelty, the young men pressed each others' hands in melancholy silence.

Hugo, on finding the underground passage, on which the water supply of the moat depended, completely choked up, and the river branch itself dry, gave up all hope of rebuilding his birthplace. He entered into negotiations to sell the land and hunting grounds to a neighboring Baron. As this business necessitated several journeys to and fro, through the woods, our two friends, armed with crossbows, indulged in a week's hunting. Returning loaded with game, they picked up the Abbot by the way, who added to their trophies two barrels of the best wine for his old friend, Duke Henry. The Benedictine proved so jolly a guest that the Duke detained him from week to week. When Conrad asked him one day if he also were not an orphan, and a fit subject for adoption, the merry monk

replied: "Not only have I been, as I believe, an orphan all my life; but I have always been partial to, and loved every other orphan, particularly such as Rosalie and Volga there." The girls received this sally with shouts of laughter.

When at last, on the approach of winter, his visit came to an end, his cheery presence was missed by all.

CHAPTER XXIII.

AND THE LAST.

"All's well, that ends well."—*Shakespeare.*

Time flew on with its simple duties and pleasures, and in due season, nature again put on, bit by bit, her beautiful garb of spring. With it came the tidings of the speedy return of Bernard von Wolfram, which gladdened the hearts of the inmates of the castle.

Once more the Abbot made the journey to Falkenstein, this time to officiate at a double wedding, to take place on the anniversary of the Princess' birthday, which, during her lifetime, had always been kept as the most important festival of the year.

A very suggestive bustle was noticed at the castle, in which the Duchess took an active part. Time, aided by circumstances, had done much toward healing her wounded heart. She was able once more to consider, and take an interest in, the claims of the living.

When the day arrived on which Conrad and Rosalie, and Hugo and Volga were to be united in matrimony, sunlight reigned supreme, the shadows of the past



As it was now Volga's turn, she stepped back some distance and sent off her missile.



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only enhancing the splendor of the present, which that morning thrilled every heart.

The great festivities or tournaments usual on former celebrations were omitted. But a comparatively small number of guests had been bidden to the castle. The Duke, however, had resolved to give them a surprise by bringing about a friendly trial of skill with the crossbow, for which Wolfram sent a beautiful Arabian steed as a prize. The target was again placed at one end of the vast arena in which Conrad and Hugo had been the victors two years before. In the center of the field of honor, where Ursula had sat on that eventful day, an awning supported by posts entwined with roses had been erected for Rosalie, the Queen of the Festival.

On the morning of that auspicious day the participants of the contest, including Volga in a picturesque hunting costume, formed in line directly in front of the stand where Rosalie, in her white bridal dress, sat enthroned among a profusion of flowers, a blushing rose herself, with her dark masses of hair for a background. She made a picture so attractive that every eye was turned upon her.

When all the male competitors had made their shots, the bolts of Henry the guide and Hugo von Waldhorst, who as usual had outdone everybody, were found sticking in the center of the target so close alongside of each other that there was apparently no room be-

tween them. As it was now Volga's turn, the girl, following the example of her lover two years before, stepped back some distance and sent off her missile, which on its downward course dropped directly upon the two already there, its point sliding between them to the plumb center of the bull's-eye.

Amidst the wildest enthusiasm Kurt brought forward the spirited Arabian and Wolfram taking it from him presented it to the proud and happy girl.

The chapel on the Falcon's Rock, which that afternoon was to be the scene of the double bridal, was garlanded with choicest flowers. The Abbot married both couples at the same time, and gave each his blessing, after which all repaired to the brilliantly illuminated banquet hall, where wine, wassail and festive song by the two minstrels, young and old, cheered the table round. The sorrows of the past were obscured by the joys of the present. So we leave them to that happiness to which honor, courage and noble self-sacrifice entitled them.

The ducal couple, looking tenderly at their new son and his lovely wife, felt that though God had taken away one great blessing, He had given in return two others, at least, to love and cherish, until He should call them to join her—"whom they had loved long since, and lost the while!"

THE END.




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